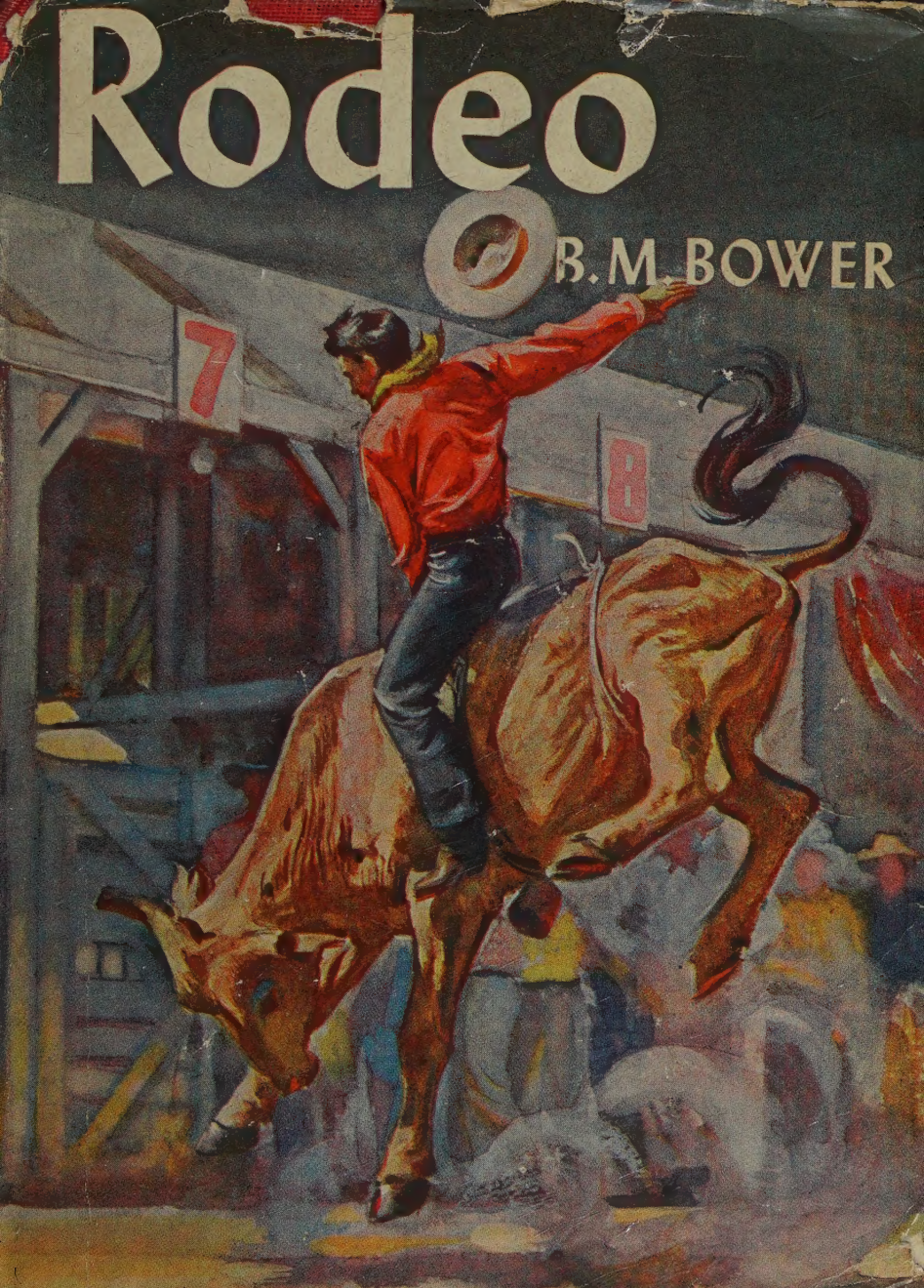
Rodeo

B. M. BOWER



The Kid—Chip's son—had the legs and eyes of a roper but the Flying U hands said he didn't have the guts, until.....

RODEO

By

B. M. BOWER

"THEY think the West has slowed down!", the Kid thought angrily. "They're wrong, dead wrong! It isn't tame yet, by a long shot! They just think it's slowed down because they've slowed down themselves! They don't hit the pace they used to hit. It —oh heck, it's their youth that's gone and they don't know it!"

It wasn't entirely the Kid's fault. He had remembered the Happy Family, Stetsoned, booted and spurred, riding recklessly across the prairies, their careless laughter keeping time with the quick staccato hoofbeats. And now, at the reunion at the old Flying U, just look at them! The Native Son wore gray plaid knickers and low tan shoes. Andy Green and Pink and Weary wore gray whip-cord breeches, leather puttees and Panamas. The Kid—Chip's son—was grown up, tall, lean and hard from riding and roping (even though the only steers he had to rope were five-hundred-dollar calves). But the Happy Family treated him as if he were still a child.

The Kid was fed up, resentful, disillusioned. After a battle of words with Chip and the Native Son he packed up and headed for the big rodeo in Chicago, riding and leading his own ponies. He'd show those washed-out oldtimers how to rope and ride! As it happened, Chip and the old Flying U boys were attending the rodeo, too. The old West came back to life in that huge metropolitan arena. The Native Son held up the reputation with his fists, but the Kid showed he had not only the legs and eyes of a roper, but the guts too. He was what he should be —Chip's son.

TRIANGLE BOOKS

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Yo. Norbert

Uncle Math and Aunt Hilda

RODEO

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By

B. M. BOWER

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RODEO

CHAPTER ONE

THE HAPPY FAMILY RETURNS

TWO days before the Fourth of July a small procession of three automobiles lifted a ribbon of fine gray dust from the road that wound eastward along the edge of the Bear Paw foothills. Far back toward Dry Lake the haze was still slowly settling to earth when the last car passed through the high gate of the Flying U fence and a small, slight man got out and pulled the gate shut, hooked the chain around the post and into a link worn smooth with much use and climbed back beside the driver.

"Same identical chain, hooked the same way as when I came through here years ago," he observed pensively to his companion. "Don't it seem like yesterday we hit out for California, Weary?"

"It sure does when I look at these hills," Weary replied. "I miss a few chucks in the road, though. They been doing some work on

it lately, looks like. We'll be in sight of the coulee in a minute."

Even as he spoke the lead car, a long, low-slung roadster of a famous foreign make, slid up to the very brow of the hill and stopped with a sudden flash of the warning red light seen rather dimly through its coating of dust. The driver, capped and goggled and otherwise bearing the earmarks of a tourist *de luxe,* twisted his slim body so that he faced to the rear, though his gauntleted hand pointed dramatically down into the valley.

"My God, boys, they've built a red barn!" he cried in the tragic voice of one unexpectedly confronted with the worst that can befall. "Can you feature it? A red barn, and it's trimmed in white like a million other barns in a dozen States!" He sank down into the seat again, shaking his head in mournful acceptance of the sacrilege. "They might as well put up a windmill and a silo and finish the job!"

Heads craned out of the following limousine. The driver flapped a hand forward in the gesture of dismissal.

"Hey, cut the agony scene and drive on, Mig! Or else pull outa the road to do your wailing, and let me past."

"What's wrong?" Weary shouted from the rear car. "Mig stalled in that tin toy of his? Lemme past, Andy, and I'll give him a tow."

But even while he was speaking the yellow roadster slid on down the steep hill, took the narrow Hogsback trail like a darting lizard and swept at a reckless speed down the last slope and across the creek on a bridge that, like the red barn, was a late improvement, leaving the two cars to bore through the thick curtain of dust at their leisure. As he passed through the big gate he remembered so well, the driver slowed and came to a stand before the bunk house where he had slept through many a bitter night when he was only a poor cowboy working for the Flying U.

As he pulled off his brown goggles and gazed reminiscently at the squat log building, the brown limousine and the blue coach that had trailed him from Dry Lake slid up and stopped with a squeal of brakes which brought a tall man to the door of the white house on the knoll beyond the cabin. Through a window beside him an old man looked out with the peering intentness of one whose sight is failing.

"Here come the boys, Dell!" the man in the doorway called over his shoulder and came hurrying down the porch steps. "Hey, you fellows, what're you stopping down there for? Drive on up here. That you in the band wagon, Mig? Hello, Andy! Hello, Weary and Pink — everybody, hello!"

"Hello yourself!" Pink, the little fellow with dimples and eyes of a childlike candor, called exuberantly. "We're running ahead of our schedule, Chip — and that's more than you could expect with these bum cars and drivers."

"The quicker the better. Say, you're sure riding good stock these days, boys. Beats plugging along on a cayuse, don't it?" Chip went from car to car, shaking hands and flinging personal jibes at them, affection turning them to compliments by the very look and tone of him.

"Get out and come in, all of you. J. G.'s been watching the road ever since we got your letter saying you could come. I don't see how you got down the hill without him spotting you. Rosemary, Dell will want to murder you if you didn't bring those two kids of yours along."

"Oh, they're here — asleep on cushions in the back of the car." Mrs. Andy Green turned to glance in where they lay. "It's a pretty long trip for little tads like them, and I hate to wake them up. Drive over there and park in the shade, can't you, Daddy? They ought to sleep another hour or two. We needn't take out the grips yet. We stopped in Dry Lake and cleaned up," she explained to Chip, as they went up to the porch. "The same old hotel — it hasn't changed a chair. Even the same paper on the wall! But we didn't see a soul we knew."

"No, the hotel has changed hands since you left. Here's Dell — come on in, all of you."

Eagerly, yet with a certain gravity hidden beneath the talk and laughter, they went trooping into the big living room of the Flying U ranch house where they had gone booted and spurred more times than they could remember. Eyes shining with something more than welcome, something of gratitude and a secret understanding, the Little Doctor greeted them each with a special significance in her warm handclasp.

It was because she had called them that they had dropped everything and come. She had

told them that J. G., their beloved Old Man whose querulous but kindly rule had held them together on the ranch with a bond stronger than the blood tie, was failing with every day that passed. He had lost interest in life and would sit for hours brooding silently upon the past, scarcely hearing when they tried to rouse him to the present. Sometimes he would talk of the old days, though not often; frequently he would ask about various members of the Happy Family. Wouldn't they try and come to spend the Fourth at the old ranch, with a real old-time reunion? Seeing them might pull J. G. back into life before he slipped too far out and away from them. There was no organic reason, she wrote, why he should not live for several years yet. His rheumatism troubled him a great deal, but aside from that, his health should be much better than it was. He was letting go on life. It might be his last Fourth of July, she had stated frankly. It would be, unless they could get hold of him somehow and pull him back.

So here they were, trying not to seem conscious of her appeal; trying not to betray the shock they felt at the change in the old man sitting there by the window in a wheel chair,

a soft robe thrown across his knees on this hot midsummer day.

Shrunken, stooped through sheer lack of energy, he sat there staring at them with that remote look in his lusterless eyes which comes when the soul is beginning to loosen its hold upon the body. His handclasp lacked the old sturdy grip of the fingers; his voice was flat, expressionless, tired. He had the habit of repeating words vaguely and of asking the same question twice or even oftener, forgetting that it had been answered. Yet there were moments when he rallied and was the Old Man they remembered, probing their activities with something approaching real interest. These moments they clung to, sought to prolong.

"They tell me you're a movin'-pitcher man now," he said accusingly to Andy Green, who was at that minute selecting a monogrammed cigarette from the Native Son's silver case. "That so? And they say Mig-uell here is an actor, and Pink too. Somebuddy was tellin' me Pink, here, puts on dresses and plays a woman's part in the movies. What's the straight of the story? Any truth in it?"

"I'm afraid so, J. G. Pink doubles for Minna Waska in all her stunt stuff and a lot of

her straight drama. She's that Indian princess that stars in Westerns. Pink's about two thirds of Minna Waska. The girl in the close-ups and love scenes is a Pilack girl with a pair of wonderful eyes that get over big on the screen. It takes 'em both to be Minna Waska, so I guess you could say Pink plays a woman's part, all right."

The Old Man grunted and eyed Pink dubiously.

"Any rider in Hollywood 'd be tickled at the chance to do my work and draw down the salary I'm getting," Pink defended himself, coloring a little under the look of disapproval. "There's plenty can ride as well as I can, and if they get fifty a week they consider themselves lucky. They're all too big to double for a girl, though. I get five hundred a week — that's why I double for Minna Waska."

"What's doublin'?" demanded J. G. pettishly, having failed to grasp it all.

They explained to him again what doubling meant. They told him all about how the Native Son had suddenly found himself a favorite with the screen public because of his slim grace in the saddle and his face that photographed so well, so that now he was playing

leads under his screen name of Luis Mendoza, with a salary of fifteen hundred a week and the prospect of getting twice that much when his present contract expired. They related their successes — how Andy was making good as a director of Westerns for Universal, and how Weary owned a fine lot of horses which he rented to different studios. Weary was making all the money he could spend and remain sober, he declared, with that sunny smile they remembered so well, that had carved deep lines around his eyes.

"Looks like the Flyin' U is prospering too," he added, swinging the subject away from himself as was his habit. "Mig almost took a fit and fell off the bluff up here when he got sight of that big red barn you've got now. He was looking for the silo that oughta go with it."

"Well, we've been thinking of putting in a silo," Chip confessed somewhat guiltily. "We're raising nothing but blooded stock now, and a silo would certainly cut down the cost of winter feeding. You can't turn a thousand-dollar cow out on the range to rustle through the winter, you know. Nor thoroughbred horses, either. We're running everything under fence and we need better shelter than

we did in the old days. So we had to have a big barn," he finished in whimsical apology, looking at Miguel.

"You didn't have to paint it red," the Native Son retorted. "From the top of the hill this location could be duplicated in Iowa or Indiana or any one of a dozen States. You've killed the old range atmosphere, Chip. A two-story red barn is about as Western as a high board fence — and as picturesque. And you're an artist too! And the Little Doctor here — I can't seem to get that red barn in the picture at all."

Her sudden laughter halted his whimsical, half-earnest diatribe.

"Even artists have to eat and wear clothes," she reminded him. "One could starve in picturesque, thoroughly Western atmosphere, but we prefer to adapt ourselves to changing conditions and go on living, just as you boys have done. Big red barns are an economic necessity, these days. Perhaps not red — but it's a good warm color that holds up well in all weathers. We're like Pink; we do it because there's more money in it than trying to patch up old sheds and letting our stock freeze."

"You're as bad as the Kid," Chip grinned

ruefully. "He thinks we ought to turn this blooded stock loose in the Badlands so we'd have to run a round-up outfit, same as we used to. Called me a hayseed the other day, the young whelp!"

"Oh, yeah — where's the Kid?" Weary pulled his pitying glance away from the Old Man. "I was going to ask about him. Big as you are, Chip, I'll bet!"

"Bigger," Chip answered laconically. "A good inch taller; weighs about what I did when I was riding every day —" He broke off abruptly, glancing involuntarily toward the Little Doctor.

"He's home, ain't he?"

"Oh, yes — got home a week ago. Rode horseback up from Laramie where we've had him in school. Crazy about horses, but —"

"But what?" Pink boldly inquired. "He ain't the kind that can't stick on a horse, is he? That don't seem possible, the way he started out when he was a little tad. It oughta run in the blood. Don't it?"

"I don't know," Chip confessed with manifest reluctance. "He likes horses and he's got no use for cars — you can hardly get him into one. He's got three good saddle horses and he

seems to spend most of his time fooling around them. He sets a horse like a rider. I don't know how he'd perform on a real salty bronk."

"I hope," the Little Doctor spoke up, "he has more sense than to try performing on one. The time for that has gone by. Our boy is going to be a doctor."

"Yeah?" Weary started as if some one had given him a blow on the back. The Old Man gave a snort of dissent, and Pink sent a quick, inquiring look toward Andy Green.

"She means," Chip explained dryly, "that she wants him to be a doctor, since he won't take any interest in the ranch. We don't know what he thinks about it, though. We don't," he added queerly, "know what he thinks about anything, much. He's taken possession of those weaning sheds and corral down in the lower pasture, and he keeps his horses down there all summer and rides around in the hills a lot. We don't see much of him, to tell you the truth."

"I want him to keep in the open air as much as possible during the summer," his mother spoke up quickly. "Claude is a very quiet, studious boy, and he is growing so fast that he needs all the fresh air and sunshine he can get.

I did want him to go to some good college in the East, but he chose Laramie University — because it's nearer home, I suppose; and it's a very good school, we find. We're all very proud of Claude, and his father is just pretending he doesn't know that we're to have a young M.D. in the family one of these days."

"That'll be fine," Weary observed with a lukewarm interest. "I never used to think the Kid would ever be anything but a real old cow-puncher. That's the way he started out, and I'd 'a' thought he'd keep it up. It kinda surprises me to hear he's taken to studying medicine."

"Well, of course he hasn't, yet," his mother admitted. "He has to lay the foundation first. And he does love horses as well as he ever did. I think he must spend most of his time in the saddle during the summers, to make up for being indoors all winter."

"Funny he don't take to ranching," Pink remarked doubtfully. "You'd think — "

"Oh, he'll fool with a rope — he's pretty good at spinning a loop. But he sure ain't cut out for a rancher," Chip told them. "I don't believe he's been inside the new barn since he came back."

"Old pioneer stock," the Old Man suddenly broke into the discussion. "Take to it all right, if it was like it used to be. Open range and the wagons startin' out by the middle uh May — he'd make a better wagon boss than his father ever did, — give 'im a chance! Soon as this dang leg uh mine lets up, I'm goin' to hunt me a new range and run cattle like they oughta be run. I'll take the Kid and Cal's boy and make range hands outa them. Him a doctor, ay? That's all you know! He's got the legs of a rider and the eyes of a roper — and if he ain't a cowhand it's because there ain't nothin' but tame milk cows left in the country. Him a doctor! Hunh!"

"Why don't you boys walk down in the pasture and see if he's there?" the Little Doctor hastily inquired. "He's anxious to see you boys — he hasn't forgotten the good times we all used to have on the ranch when he was a little fellow, and I know he made it a point to hurry home from school just because he knew you were coming."

"Yeah, let's go hunt him up," Weary agreed with alacrity, understanding perfectly well that the Little Doctor wanted to keep the Old Man from getting himself worked up

over the vanished days of open range and round-ups.

They went off to find the Kid, therefore; though their eagerness was a shade dimmed by the description they had just listened to. The Kid a studious youth, going to be a doctor! Somehow they were disappointed, though they could not have told why.

CHAPTER TWO

CHIP'S KID

DOWN in the lower pasture on a level stretch above the corral that stood against the creek bank, the Kid wheeled his clean-limbed sorrel, backed him over a line gouged in the meadow sod, shook out his loop, hung a small rope between his teeth and glanced toward the corral. A boy of twelve had just turned out a Hereford bull calf and was fastening the gate against others. As he swung his horse to chase the animal down past the waiting rider he pulled a watch from his pocket, squinted at it, looked at the calf, picked a white flag from beneath his thigh, held it aloft for a second, dipped it suddenly and shouted:

"Go!"

The sorrel leaped forward, the rope circling over the rider's head. A quick drumming of hoofbeats as they surged up alongside the running calf, and the loop shot out and over the animal's head as the Kid jumped

off and ran forward. The sorrel settled back, holding the rope taut, and the Kid seized the fighting victim, flipped it dexterously on its side, grabbed and bound together a hind foot and the forefeet with the rope he jerked from between his teeth, gave a twist and a yank and rose, flinging up both hands in signal that he had finished. Whereupon the boy on the little bay cow-pony dropped the flag which he had been holding aloft, stared fixedly at the watch in his left hand and shouted in a high, clear treble that carried across to the Happy Family concealed in the willows along the creek:

"Kid *Ben*-nett! Ti-ime, for-tee sev'n an' one-fifth *seck*-unds!"

"Aw, you're all wet, Boy!" the roper disgustedly protested, looking up from freeing the young bull. "Where do you get that stuff? If I didn't make it in thirty flat, I'm a dry-farmer! You had your darned flag nailed to the mast after I signalled. Forty-seven my eye! And what's the idea of whittling it down to fifths? Go get an alarm clock, Boy. It'd beat that Sears-Roebuck stop watch, anyhow."

"Say, who's doin' this judgin', anyhow?"

Boy demanded hotly. "You're penalized ten seconds, Kid Bennett, for gettin' over the foul line before the critter crossed the dead line!"

"Oh, go soak! I was a good six inches back of the line!" Kid suddenly laughed and flung out both arms, shooing the bull off down the flat. "I told you to hold me strictly down to the rules, Boy, but that don't mean you've got to disqualify me every time we come out here. And you needn't call time on me from the minute I saddle up, either! I made that in thirty flat, and I know it."

"Well, s'posin' you did? You want me to go swellin' your head every time you make a good throw? You got to get used to strict judgin'. I betcha Weary or Pink or any of the boys that's comin' can beat your time so far, Kid. You're good, but you ain't good enough yet. You just think you are."

"Well, give a fellow some show, anyway. Thirty flat is pretty good — especially when you ran in a bigger calf on me this time and never said a word. That baby weighs close to four hundred, and I'd bet money on it. He's one of the new bunch Dad just got. You can't fool me, Boy. He was a son-of-a-gun to lay down!"

"Well, for the crying-out-loud!" Boy leaned and spat into the grass, man-fashion. "What'd yuh want? One that'll lay down and stick his feet together and beller for you to come an' tie 'im? All them others is got so they'll do it, almost, you've throwed an' tied 'em so much. You want 'em big an' tough, Kid. You said the only way to get good is to throw big ones, so contest calves will feel like throwin' a tame cat!"

"Well, that's all right too," the Kid began temporizingly, when voices from the willows halted him. He swung that way, his face a mask of guarded resentment. An observant person would have seen the sensitive hurt in his eyes when laughter mingled with the words that came to him in fragments of sentences.

" — five hundred dollars for that calf," Chip was saying. " — break a leg — darned kids haven't got any sense — "

" — comes natural — " another voice broke in. And then, distinct, unforgivable, patronizing it seemed to the Kid, came that platitude, "Boys will be boys."

The Kid's lips set in a straight line. He sent a glance toward Boy, who was hastily unty-

ing his handkerchief flag from the stick. Boy looked scared, as if he had been caught in mischief. The Kid thrust a toe in the stirrup and swung into the saddle. He was riding away straight-backed and angry when Chip's voice stopped him.

"Hey, wait a minute! The boys are here and they want to say hello."

Kid gave the reins a twitch and the sorrel swung in toward the willows, from which the Happy Family came walking with eager steps. The Kid stared frankly, forgetting his resentment in the shock of this meeting.

Well as he remembered those idols of his childhood, Pink and Weary, Andy Green and the Native Son, he scarcely recognized them now. Like centaurs of the range they had ridden through his worshipful memory; the best riders in the world, he loyally believed; the best ropers, the best shots, the finest friends. Heroes all, drifting out of his life before he had learned that after all they were human, and being human they were subject to changes if they were to adapt themselves to new environments.

The Kid remembered them Stetsoned, booted and spurred, riding recklessly across

the prairies, their careless laughter keeping time with the quick staccato of hoofbeats. While he had not taken the trouble to apply a bit of logic to the matter, it seemed reasonable to suppose that they would return very much as he had last seen them. They did not. The Native Son wore gray plaid knickers, woolly golf stockings, and low tan shoes. His coat was a soft gray and his modish cap was gray. Any country club would recognize him as one of their own kind, but to the Kid he was as alien as a Hindu in that meadow. Andy Green and Pink and Weary wore gray whipcord breeches, leather puttees and Panamas. Even their faces were unfamiliar, though Pink's dimples woke memories of bunk-house laughter long ago. Which one of the four, he wondered, had suggested that boys would be boys? Did they think he was merely playing, down there in the heat of afternoon? They and their Hollywood get-up!

"Say, you'll be a fair-sized man when you grow up," Weary greeted him facetiously as he reached up a hand to the Kid sitting there immobile on Stardust, looking down at them with a baffling reserve in his smoky gray eyes.

"Yes, I suppose I shall," the Kid agreed

unsmilingly, as he shook hands. His old idol, Weary, wearing putts!

"Trying to be a re'l ol' cow-puncher, still," Andy Green observed lightly, hiding a great tenderness that welled up in his heart as he took the gloved hand of the Kid who had snuggled against him in the saddle, many's the time, and lisped grave prophecies of the wonderful things he would do when he was a man.

"Oh, no — just exercising the horse a little, is all. Real cow-punchers are a thing of the past. It's all out of date to talk of punching cows, Andy."

"It sure is with this registered stock," Chip grimly agreed. "Pretty expensive stuff to bust on a rope, Kid. You'll have to find something cheaper than these bulls to practise on."

"Where?" The Kid gave his dad a slow, level look, and leaned to shake hands with Pink and the Native Son. "I'm certainly glad to see you all," he said. But he did not look glad, and what he felt would never be put into words; the heartachy disappointment, the sense of loss and of bafflement. It was with a distinct feeling of relief that he saw them turn toward Boy, hovering near with the reins

tight on his little bay cow-pony as if he were all ready to wheel and make a dash across the meadow.

"This is Cal's boy," Chip announced in the casual tone one usually adopts in introducing children to their grown-ups. "They've got a ranch up above Meeker's. Say, you wouldn't know old Cal! He's as big one way as he is the other — weighs over two hundred. But he's got a nice wife and bunch of kids. Boy's the oldest. Cal and his wife couldn't agree on a name for him, so they call him Boy."

"My name's Calvin Claude," Boy announced with bashful abruptness, and immediately his ears turned a deep red framed with his tow-colored hair.

"That's not according to your mother," Chip said teasingly. "You've heard a lot about Weary and Pink and Andy and Mig. Your dad used to punch cows with them before he got too fat to ride. If you're going home pretty soon, Boy, tell your dad the boys are here — got here sooner than we expected them. He may want to drive down after supper."

"All right. I'm goin' now." His round eyes still staring frankly at the four, Boy reined his

horse away, hammered him on the ribs with his run-down heels and rode off.

"I think I'll ride over with him," the Kid announced suddenly, breaking a somewhat awkward pause. "I have an errand over that way. If I'm not back by supper time, Dad, tell Mother not to wait. I'll see you later, all of you. I'm surely glad to have met you again." Two fingers went up and tilted his gray Stetson half an inch downward as he wheeled and galloped after Boy, while the five stood there watching him go.

"Oughta have a camera on that," Andy muttered mechanically, though that is probably not what he was thinking.

"Say, if I could high-hat 'em like that, I could pull down ten thousand a week!" the Native Son murmured enviously.

Further than that they made no comment as they turned to walk back up the creek to the house. But Chip was chewing a corner of his lip in the way he did when he was bottling his fury, and the faces of the four looked as they did when they stood contemplating a blow-out ten miles from the nearest service station.

"The Kid's been off to college, you say?"

Andy ventured, after a silent five minutes.

"One year is all. We wanted to put him in Berkeley or Stanford, but he balked and wouldn't go anywhere but Laramie. He's something of a problem," Chip confessed. "Dell wants him to be an M.D. — I don't know how that's going to pan out, though. Fact is, we can't seem to get a line on him, what he thinks or wants. Except that he's crazy about horses and guns, we don't know much about him."

"He's a dead ringer for you, Chip, when I first saw you," Weary said bluntly. "Taller, maybe, and his eyes are different. Better looking by a whole lot, but shut up inside of himself, the way you used to be. Seems to me you ought to get together somehow. You've got things in common; horses and saddles and ropes and spurs — lots of things."

"Theoretically, yes. But when a kid goes off to school you seem to lose all track of him. I didn't even know he could throw and tie a critter, till he did it just now. He never let on to me that he ever wanted to try." Chip stopped to roll a cigarette. "Acted sore because we caught him at it. He's a queer make-up, somehow."

"Wish we'd got there half a minute sooner," Weary observed. "I guess they were just playing contest, but still he musta made his catch, all right. That critter sure picked himself up like he'd been tied down and didn't like it. Looks to me, Chip, like he's got the earmarks, all right. Why don't yuh feel him out, kinda? The Old Man may be right. In fact, I think he is. The Kid has got the look — "

"What good would it do if he had?" Chip cut in sharply. "If it was twenty years ago — but it's now, remember. I don't want the Kid to have the old fever in his blood; not when there's nothing to work it out on. If we had open range and were running ten or twenty thousand head of cattle like we used to do — sure, I'd make a real hand of the Kid. Good as any of us, Weary. The Kid's got the stuff in him, but the less it's cultivated the better off he is. I don't know whether he realizes it or not. I hope not. He hates the ranch as it is, so I hope he takes the notion to be a doctor, as Dell wants him to be."

"It's a damn shame," sighed Weary. "We oughta be in off round-up now, for the Fourth; with the wagons camped on Birch

Creek or maybe here at the ranch; and a bunch of bronks in the corral and a dance on in Dry Lake schoolhouse — "

"Say, I wish you'd shut up," Pink entreated almost tearfully. "I had a hunch this visit back here was going to call up old times till I'll be a year getting over it. Say, I'd give five years of my life to be back on round-up with the same old string of horses — Casey and Frog and old Fritz — "

"Who's callin' up things now?" Andy shut him off. "Can't yuh let well enough alone? I been trying all day to forget how it'd feel to be ridin' into camp in a high lope, hungry as a wolf, and smellin' those blueberry pies old Patsy used to make."

"Say, I'd give all I've got to be standing night guard again, with a cool breeze whisperin' through the grass and the stars all sprinkled over the sky — say what you will, there's nothing to compare with it!" The Native Son flicked ash from his cigarette and stared wistfully at the familiar line of hills.

"It sure is a crime the way the country has settled up," Andy lamented. "I never realized that the old range is a thing of the past, till I

got to driving up this way. It ain't the same country to me."

"You're dead right, it's changed," Chip gloomily agreed. "But while I think of it, boys, don't talk about it before the Old Man if you can help it. He gets all stirred up over it, and he can't stand it. We try to keep his mind as quiet as we can — though he does sometimes forget times are changed and talks as if he could run cattle like he used to. I don't know what he thinks of your city clothes — I saw him eyeing you kinda funny. But I suppose there's too many movie cowboys as it is."

"That's right," Pink attested somewhat sourly. "Fellows that never saw a round-up in their lives — aw, hell! We've got so we class ridin' boots and Stetsons with grease paint; we keep 'em for the camera. The world has changed a lot, Chip, and it ain't changed for the better, either. An old cowhand has got no show at all to be himself, these days. He's either got to crawl off and die somewhere, or join the parade and get as close to the band wagon as he can, and look as if he liked it!"

"And that explains the red barn you fellows objected to." Chip turned aside from the

trail and led them toward its wide-spreading doors. "Come on inside and I'll show you some real aristocrats among cows. Not much like the hard-boiled old range cows we used to tail up at the water holes, with the snow drifted on their backs even with their hip bones! But I'm making money, and that's what keeps you fellows in the movies."

So they drifted away from the Kid and the polite snub he had given them. They did not refer to him again that afternoon, though they had spoken of him a good deal on the way from California and had talked over every cute little baby way and every boyish prank he had perpetrated while they were still at the Flying U. How he had nearly drowned Silver, and how he had ridden off with a bag of doughnuts and jelly and prunes and lost himself in the Bad Lands trying to find the round-up and help the boys. How he had been kidnaped and had escaped and let Silver carry him home — things which the Kid had forgotten long ago, very likely. But they remembered, and they had felt the old proprietary affection for him welling up in their hearts as they recalled the things he had done, the things he had said, the way he had

looked when he was six and wore chaps, boots, spurs and cowboy hat which Chip had had made to order.

And the Kid had been polite and impersonal and aloof. He had tilted his hat and said he was glad to have met them again, and had ridden away on a trumped-up errand, never once looking back or giving them a human, warm smile of greeting for sake of old times. They did not say anything, but the hurt went deep and rankled for all that.

CHAPTER THREE

"WHY, THEY'RE GETTING OLD!"

SLIM and Happy Jack, grown heavy and plodding in their years of service, came jouncing home from the upper meadow in an old Ford with flapping front fenders, two irrigating shovels rattling in the back of the car. Their raucous welcome to the four from Hollywood was distinctly audible to the Kid where he sat on a flat place in the rock rim of the coulee, glooming down at the ranch and trying to swallow his disappointment in his four idols of the past. Slim and Happy were not awed by the resplendence of the visitors, it appeared; their pungent taunts concerning the Native Son's striped socks and knee pants floated up the hill, followed by Miguel's instant attack upon the ancient vehicle they drove.

"First time in your lives you ever topped a rough one," he cried derisively, "and you have to hobble your stirrups even now to stay with it more than a couple of jumps!"

The Kid grinned in spite of himself, for Happy and Slim had always been notoriously poor riders. He watched the group go off down to the old mess house together, all talking at once and laughing for no apparent reason, and his eyes followed them meditatively, a longing to be one of them growing stronger and stronger within him. He had expected to be a part of that hilarious reunion. Until he had seen them walking across the meadow toward him and had sensed an alien quality that went deeper than the difference in their appearance, he had counted the days to their coming. And they had been like utter strangers when he saw them; youth is always slow to adapt itself to the change of years.

But now, as he sat staring absently down upon the roof that sheltered them as it had done before he was born, an ache of homesickness gripped the Kid by his throat. They were down there in the mess house — Weary, Pink, Andy Green and the Native Son — just as they used to be when he was a little tad and begged his mother to let him eat with the boys, because he was going to be a cowpuncher when he got big enough. They were

there in the same big room, with the stove and kitchen things in one end and the long table in the other; the same stove, the same table, almost the same dishes. They'd be glad that nothing had changed; nothing except old Patsy, who was dead, his place filled now by another old round-up cook, old Bob Simms. Bob knew the boys too. They'd be glad the old mess house hadn't changed much. Didn't the Kid know? He who had held that room close in his affections, a secret shrine wherein he had worshiped the memory of his beloved Happy Family.

Well, the old bunch was together again; most of them, anyway. Now and then a burst of laughter floated up to him; Slim's great bellow that was so seldom heard nowadays; Andy Green's high, rocking *hoo-hoo-hoo* that could set the echoes laughing across the creek against the farther coulee wall. The Kid's eyes softened. After all, they were the same old boys, by the sound of them. He had maybe been too quick to judge. Knickers and putts — what if they had permitted themselves to slip into city ways and city dress? He remembered somewhat guiltily a pair of plus fours packed away in his own trunk,

and that he even went so far as to wear them upon occasion.

The Kid got up and went to where Stardust stood patiently waiting, reins dropped to the ground, and rode over to where the trail dropped down through a wide gap in the rim rock, following it down across the Hogsback, down the steeper slope below to the creek. He was in a hurry now. He wanted to get in on the fun in the mess house. It seemed as though he had not seen the boys at all; those strange men who walked out of the willows had not counted. In the mess house, sitting around the long table, eating and talking and smoking, it would seem more like old times.

Cal had come sometime during the Kid's long absence. The boys were sitting around the table, just as the Kid had expected them to be doing; smoking and talking of old times. The horses they had ridden, the long drives, this mischance and that adventure — they scarcely noticed his entrance, so engrossed were they in reminiscence. The Kid, finding himself a perch on a high box back in the corner, listened and looked on and tried to close his mind against a certain disquieting conviction that was growing within him.

They were boasting of their old skill, magnifying old exploits — "telling it scarey," in their own phraseology — and they were belittling the present and sneering at the riders of to-day.

"I tell you, Chip, they don't *grow* 'em no more!" Andy Green declared vehemently, bringing his fist down hard on the table — a gesture he had learned at the studios, no doubt. "These young squirts that have sprung up and claim to be riders are *pitiful* to an old cowhand! You take it in pictures, for instance. The camera does most of the stunt stuff — all that ain't done by old hands like Pink and some others. These young contest sheiks — why the poor saps don't know a bronk from a polo pony!"

"Yeah, take these contests they put on all over the country nowadays!" Pink chimed in. "Paid performers crow-hopping around on old benches that ain't got a real buck-jump in 'em and never had. Saps pay their money and go and gawp, and think they're seeing the real West! It makes you sick. There *ain't* any real West no more!"

The Kid, over in his corner, got up and lounged forward, hands in pockets as if he

didn't care, but with a light in his eyes that said the slight had struck home.

"How is it, then, that the record for roping and tying has been lowered on you old-timers by the young squirts of to-day?" he drawled. "Bulldogging too. The saps that go and gawp will give you the laugh if your time runs over twenty seconds. And have you ever seen Chile Bean do his stuff; or Invalid, or Heel Do?" He paused to give them a chance if they wanted it.

"I'm one of the young squirts you're talking about," he went on. "You fellows were tophole — nobody knows that better than I do. But when you say there is no more West, you're dead wrong. You ought to take your heads out of the nosebag and look around, before you give us the raspberry. There is a West, and it's just as real as it used to be, even though it's different. There are real riders and ropers and bulldoggers too — under twenty-five years of age."

There was a moment of that dead silence which is a contradiction and a reproach.

"If there's any of the real West left, I sure as hell would like to see it!" said Pink, taking up the challenge.

"I can show you some, if you care to take the time."

"As for the riding and roping," Andy began, in the tone of one who would presently put the Kid in his place, "they don't tie down the kinda critters we used to. A sucking calf is some different from a three-year-old steer. And horses don't buck the way they used to."

"Don't they, though! Sometime when you feel particularly lucky, go hunt up any of the horses I've named, or any one of a dozen others."

"You're speaking out of turn, Kid." Chip gave him a fatherly look of reproof. "What you know about riding and roping you could write on a dime. This bunch has spent more hours in the saddle than you have lived. Do you think none of us ever saw a contest?"

"We're going to have a chance next month," the Native Son observed in his negligently good-natured tone. "I'm due to go to Chicago on location when they hold their big rodeo there. Andy's going to direct the contest scenes, and maybe," he added dryly, "we can work it so Pink and Weary can go along. That'll give us all a chance to see some real pretty riding!"

The Kid was leaving, but he stopped in the doorway and looked back at the speaker.

"If you get in a jam and want a double to ride for you," he said evenly, "look me up, Mig. I'm liable to be there."

"Like thunder you'll be there!" Chip wrathfully exclaimed. "You'll be in school, where you belong!"

But the Kid was walking down the deep-worn path to the stable and probably did not hear him. He was a little ashamed of himself even before he reached his horse, yet he knew that he was speaking the truth — except that fling at the Native Son, of course. They didn't make any better riders than the Native Son, the Kid admitted honestly to himself; or than he *had* been, before the movies had got him. He hadn't meant that, and he was sorry he had said it. It discounted his other assertion. They would think he was just mouthy and stuck on himself, and let it go at that.

But no real West? The old buffalo hunters and Indian fighters had probably made the same complaint when the Happy Family rode the range. They, too, had been told that the old West was gone and the country was get-

ting too settled and civilized. They had laughed at the notion, no doubt; but here they were, mourning in their turn the passing of the West. It angered the Kid, who loved every mile of it for its bigness, the wide sweep of its prairies, the unconquerable vastness of its mountain ranges, for the heady keenness of its whooping winds.

"They're wrong, dead wrong!" he told himself hotly, when he was lying in his camp bed gazing up at the purple sky with its millions of twinkling lights. "There are more fences and more towns and more people, but it isn't tame yet, by a long shot! They think it's slowed down, but it's just because they've slowed down themselves. The young fellows don't find it so tame! They don't hit the pace they used to hit. It — oh, heck, it's their youth that's gone, and they don't know it!"

Upon that pathetic thought the Kid meditated long and pityingly. It was a darned shame men had to grow old and soft, so they couldn't ride a bronk or throw a rope the way they used to do. He wished they had his muscle and endurance — he'd take them into country as wild as when the Indians painted their ponies and themselves and rode in

breechclouts with feathers in their hair. Why a little more — just a few more years — and they'd be like his uncle J. G., just sitting in the house doing nothing but talk about old times!

"Gosh, I hadn't realized it, but the Happy Family's getting old! Too bad . . . good boys too, before they lost their stride . . ." Upon that commiserating thought the Kid's heavy-lashed eyelids drooped and stayed down. In the cool starlight he slept with the sound, untroubled slumber of youth.

In the guest room of the white house on the knoll a vastly different point of view was discussed at about that time, when Andy Green had at last felt the yearning for sleep after a hard day's drive and was making ready for bed. A muttered exclamation when he stubbed his bare toe against a rocker had roused his wife, and some conversation ensued. Part of it concerned the very thing the Kid was thinking about as he fell asleep.

"Has the Kid come back, Andy? Dell felt really put out about his going off that way when he knew we were here and all. Of course, she tried to hide it, but she kept mak-

ing excuses for him — you saw him, didn't you? What's he like?"

Andy gave a grunt that might have meant anything.

"Isn't he — nice?"

"Oh-h — just a darned swell-headed goslin' — looks like Chip used to, quite a lot; something like his mother too. Thinks he's forgot more than the rest of us ever knew. I don't know where he gets it — if he was my kid I'd sure take a lot of that out of him. Chip's too easy."

"I can't imagine the Kid turning out like that," Rosemary made regretful comment. "He was the dearest boy — "

"It sure is too bad," Andy agreed. "High hat — that kind of thing. I guess maybe he'll get over it in time, but he sure as the world has got a bad attack of know-it-all now! Why — " he raised his voice indignantly, then dropped it to a mumble when his wife nudged him warningly " — he was even trying to tell us boys we didn't know what real riding and roping is! Can you beat that?"

"No!" Rosemary managed to express a world of incredulity in that one word.

"And that," Andy finished with gloomy

finality, "is what a man gets when he sends a kid to college. Takes 'em ten years to get over it."

"What a shame!" yawned Mrs. Andy. "Dell is so proud she'd die before she'd own she's disappointed in Claude — "

"I don't know as she is. Mothers don't see their kids the way other folks do. Or fathers either — though I must say Chip don't seem overly keen about him."

"Too bad!" decided Rosemary, much as the Kid had done. "He was such a good boy, I hate to think of him spoiled — but of course you mustn't let on you notice it, Andy. It would hurt Dell terribly if she thought — "

"Oh, I ain't going to tell 'em what I think of him," Andy mumbled sleepily. "Gosh, it's good to get stretched out in a good bed, after some of them hotels we put up at! My old bones ache to-night — we'll take it easier going back. No sense in driving like Billy-be-damn just to get over the road. If Mig wants to step on 'er he can; I'm goin' to take it easy."

So Andy unconsciously proved the Kid's deductions were in a measure correct, though neither of them was aware of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KID REBELS

THE Kid awoke at daylight under the canopied, soft tints of summer sunrise, and lay for a time looking up at the changing hues of the clouds, basking wordlessly in the glory of life. Some of the artist's love of beauty must have come to the Kid from his father, though he had never taken to pencil or brush but contented himself so far with the secret glow of appreciation when sheer perfection such as this morning lay all about him. But his mind gradually returned to the thoughts of last night and revolved about the deplorable change he saw in the four members of the Happy Family who had come so far and so fast to spend the Fourth at the old ranch, and who had left so much in the past that they couldn't quite focus their eyes upon the present.

The Kid, stretching his long limbs luxuriously under the two blankets that covered

him, thought what a pity it was that the boys couldn't face life as he faced it. No wonder they resented the years that had taken the horses they loved — he supposed they loved the horses they talked about, just as he loved Stardust and Blazes and Sunup. It must be pretty tough, all right, to feel yourself growing old, no longer toughened to the trails, having to leave all the good times behind you for the young fellows to enjoy.

In that mood of sincere sympathy the Kid began this day by determining to do all in his power to show the boys a nice time while they were here. He decided that it was all wrong to think of having a little exhibition of roping and riding. He had expected that the boys would fall in with the idea and take part in the fun, and perhaps give him some good pointers — they who were such experts. But now he saw that it would prove a one-man show, and that they would merely sit back and tolerate him and think he was showing off; and they would tell how they used to do it, and probably they would make him feel like a fool. So he cancelled his little Wild West program and set himself the task of finding out what they really would enjoy the most.

By noon he thought he knew. What they enjoyed most, it seemed to him, was sitting around on the porch talking about horses and round-ups and fights and men, with Chip and the Old Man. Even the women were absorbed in their own interests. Rosemary fussed with her two little tads, as she called them — pretty little things they were, questing like young quail and needing a watchful eye upon them — and talking with the Little Doctor, also about old times.

Nobody needed the Kid, and nobody paid any attention to him. Though he remembered a good many incidents they recalled, they did not seem to include him in any of their reminiscences or to care what he remembered, any more than if he were ten years old instead of twenty past. In the two hours and more after breakfast that he lingered on the porch, waiting for a chance to show his affectionate understanding and his friendly intentions toward them, not a dozen words were spoken to him directly. Once, Weary asked for a match and turned away when the Kid told him he didn't smoke; and once Rosemary, coming out to get Junior, paused and fixed her pretty brown eyes upon him and

asked how he liked college. Not a head turned his way when the Kid said, "All right." Rosemary smiled and plucked her young child by the back of his rompers and scooted him into the house, and that was the end of the Kid's conversation with the company that morning. They were all too busy. Memory had carried them back into a time that shut him out as with a high wall.

The Kid enjoyed hearing them talk, but the inaction palled upon him and it looked as though this sort of thing would last all day. He did not know, you see, that they were consciously drawing the Old Man out of his brooding silence, trying to lure him back to an interest in life. At any rate, he grew tired of sitting still and letting his long legs dangle off the porch, so he got to his feet and started unobtrusively for the corral where he had left Stardust saddled when he rode up from his camp in the lower pasture. Chip, brought back to the present by the movement, called after him to leave those young bulls alone or he'd break a leg; meaning, of course, a bull's leg. But no one asked where he was going or suggested that he come back and stay with the bunch; which was not like the Happy

Family, as any one who knows them will observe.

The Kid understood, or thought he did. They were sore because he had told them the truth last night. Probably he had made a fool of himself — he should have known they didn't want to be disturbed in their delusions. But he was hurt and disappointed nevertheless and he felt considerably let down after his careful diagnosis of their case and his good resolutions and all.

So he packed an emergency ration of one package of raisins and a few hardtack which he kept in camp for his long rides, changed his saddle to Blazes, who needed exercise that day, and rode off into the hills toward the river. Not that he wanted to go off and sulk, but because he was pursuing a somewhat rigid training for himself and his horses, and several hours in the saddle each day, riding through rough country, was a part of his program to toughen his mounts and himself.

He liked the solitude of those long, twisty canyons and the high, windy ridges between. He liked to follow them at random, losing himself in the labyrinth of little gulches for awhile, just for the pleasure of working his

way out; not always an easy thing to do, though his sense of location was splendidly developed. It was wilderness unspoiled, in spite of the occasional little ranches nested in deep, shut-in valleys. Sometimes he liked to ride through the small pastures and imagine himself a hermit living there away from the world, but mostly he avoided them and tried to ignore the fact that they were near.

To-day, with the talk of the Happy Family fresh in his mind and with their attitude toward him rankling in his heart, he turned aside from his usual route and burrowed deeper and deeper into the wild, scarcely conscious of the way he took but wanting only to ride and ride and turn back only when he must. So eventually he awoke to the fact that the day was far spent and he had not the faintest notion of the way he had come, nor the way he should go. It had been hunger that gnawed its way to his attention, so now he ate a little, drank from a spring that, unlike many other springs in the Bad Lands, happened to be good water, and gave himself to the problem of finding the way home.

Before, when he had lost himself purposely, it had been sheer pretense and he had

always kept a fair record in his mind of the general course he had taken. To-day he had been glooming along thinking of other things and had lost himself with a vengeance. It was late when he started back, and it was dark before he had found a way out of that canyon.

It was late the next afternoon when he arrived at a ranch and found the place deserted, every one having gone out somewhere to celebrate the Fourth, no doubt. Too bad. The folks were having a picnic party for all the old-timers in the country, and it might be that these ranchers were old acquaintances of Weary and the others. The Kid went in and borrowed some bread, gathered half a hatful of eggs at the stable, milked a tame cow in the little pasture and feasted beside a camp fire down by the creek. It was not the way he had expected to spend this Fourth of July, and the folks were probably worrying about him, but that did not impair his appetite for bread and milk and hard-boiled eggs.

Blazes, too, was hungry. The Kid decided to let him graze for an hour before he started home, and in the meantime he lay back in the shade of the willows and took a nap, his big

hat tilted down over his face. It was dark when he awoke — indeed, by the stars it was close to midnight. The Kid got up, caught his horse and saddled in haste and started homeward along the rough ranch road that crawled crookedly through the canyons to where it finally debouched into a river trail which the Kid recognized. Even then he was miles from the Flying U and the dawn wind was creeping over the hills.

The night was graying to that ghostly translucence that precedes daybreak when the Kid unsaddled Blazes at his own camp and sent him off nickering to join his companions in the meadow. It was hours too early for breakfast. He crawled into his bed, tired and sleepy and considerably crestfallen over his mischance, and immediately he fell into deep, dreamless slumber.

The midday meal was over when the Kid, whistling a meaningless jazz tune, came sauntering up the path with his hands in his pockets and his big Stetson tilted at a rakish angle over one eyebrow just to show he didn't care. But he did care. In back of that nonchalant pose he was squirming with apprehension over the reception he would receive. Were

they mad, and would they give him the devil? Had they worried, thinking something had happened to him? Parents did worry upon the slightest provocation. The Kid would almost rather they got up on their ear about it.

There they all were, sitting around on the porch talking and looking almost as if they had not moved from the spot since he left. The Kid's saunter grew a shade more arrogant, trying to hide his dread of the battery of glances that turned upon him in varying degrees of disapproval. But after all he passed the ordeal very well, it seemed to him, though he grew hot inside at the transparent effort to accept his return as a matter of course; something of no moment because he had not been missed. But his lips did not lose their pucker and his tune did not miss a note until his foot was upon the lowest step of the porch, Pink moving aside to make room for him. He nodded a negligent greeting that included them all, flung a careless sentence after it for good measure and went into the house.

"Claude Bennett, where have you been since day before yesterday?" the Little Doctor demanded with hard, bright eyes.

"Oh, riding around," the Kid told her smil-

ingly, though a premonitory tightening of his throat shortened the sentence perforce.

"Riding around! You're getting more impossible every day of your life! You — "

"I'll have a talk with this young hound, Dell," Chip's voice behind the Kid interrupted her. "Nothing you can say would hit the spot. If he hasn't any more decency than to pull a stunt like this, he's got to be taught a few things. No boy of mine can insult the best friends I've got on earth — "

"How?" the Kid turned to face the storm he felt was coming. But his mother stepped between the two and with a hand on Chip's shoulder shook her head in a gesture of complete understanding.

"Not now, honey. I want to talk to Claude myself. I've got to. And I don't want you present, my dear. Go back to the boys until I've finished, and then if you have anything you feel you must say, I'll turn Claude over to you; and I won't," she promised him hastily when she saw rebellion in his face, "I won't interfere. But he's my son too, you know. If we've spoiled him, I'm as much to blame as you and I must have my chance. Go on, before J. G. gets all upset!"

The Kid, thus warned, turned and set his hat upon a chair, smoothed back his heavy brown mane that had one deep wave across the top, and folded his arms.

"Who's going to administer the anæsthetic?" he inquired lightly, as the door closed behind his dad.

It needed just that note of levity, perhaps, to stiffen the Little Doctor's determination and furnish the cue she needed for the most unpleasant speech of her life. And the Kid stood and took the lash of her eloquence, immobile as a figure in bronze; arms folded, head bent a little so that he looked down into her blazing eyes. But as she talked she saw the soul of him withdraw itself farther and farther from her, until his eyes were as cold as ice; which was a strange way the Kid had brought up with him from babyhood. It frightened her a little now; made her feel as if she were upbraiding a man stone deaf.

"Courtesy and consideration, Claude, are indispensable to a doctor, whose whole life is given to serving humanity," she finished a bit desperately. "You can't go on like this, ignoring the common courtesies of life — "

"Just a minute, Mother. It might simplify

matters for you a little to know that I have no intention of being a doctor."

She drew a long breath, staring up at him blankly for an appreciable moment.

"I know you've been taking that for granted, and I hated to disappoint you, so I didn't say anything about it. But seeing I'm the weeds anyway in your estimation and Dad's, I may as well give you the complete list of my crimes."

"If you're not going to be a doctor," she managed to say, "why have you gone on for two whole years studying — "

"Knowledge is power," the Kid told her unemotionally. "Nowadays a fellow needs the background of some good school; if he can get it, he's that much to the good, no matter what he does later on."

"Well, if background is all you're getting out of it," the Little Doctor said indignantly, "I'll agree with your dad that it's time we took you out of school and put you to work at something. Background is all very well, but it's the foreground that interests us just now, young man."

"Looks to you pretty much of a smear, I suppose," the Kid suggested.

"*Very* much a smear!"

"All right, if that's the way you feel. I suppose I'm free to think what I please of the foreground. Is that all, Mother? Dad's waiting to unburden himself on the subject, you know." The Kid turned and picked up his hat, holding it so that his mother could not see how his hands were shaking.

"Claude Bennett, what in heaven's name has come over you in the last year or two? Aren't you even sorry you've acted like an insufferable cad?"

The Kid stiffened, his mouth pressed shut in the stubborn look his mother knew of old.

"Can't you say you're sorry? Answer me, Claude!"

"Yes," said the Kid, giving her a sudden stern look, "I am sorry. I'm sorry my mother can condemn me unheard and take it for granted I'm an insufferable cad."

"Unheard? What possible excuse — "

"Oh, it doesn't matter — now." The Kid turned, found the door knob with a blind, groping movement of his hand and went out. As he left the house his father joined him and the two walked together down the path, shoul-

ders almost touching as they went, but worlds apart in spirit.

What passed between them when they reached the privacy of the big barn no one knew, except that Slim, coming from one of the corrals, overheard and reported the end of the conversation. The Kid was speaking rapidly, not very loud but with every word as clear-cut and distinct as hammer blows upon an anvil.

"I won't apologize to the boys, and I won't apologize to you or Mother. You didn't wait to hear why I stayed away, but formed your own opinion before I showed up. And that's okay with me — but I won't apologize."

"You will, if you expect to stay on this ranch," blazed Chip, his face hard as granite. "It's come to a point where I'm going to find out who's boss, you or me. I've paid out good money sending you to school — and all it's done so far is to give you the idea you're cock of the walk. Talk about college education! It's knocked all the sense out of you you ever did have. There won't be any more of it, I can tell you that. You march back to the house and tell your mother you're ashamed of

yourself and you'll try to be half human from now on!"

"I will not! I'm not ashamed of myself, and I'm not going to lie about it."

"Then pack your belongings and drift," snapped Chip. "When you're ready to haul in your horns, you can come back; not before."

"Say!" The Kid's face matched Chip's for hardness. "Do you think you could *tie* me and keep me here, after this? You and Mother treat me as if I were about six years old. You fail to realize that I'm grown up!"

"Well," said Chip with much sarcasm, "if the rest of you ever grows to match the size of your head, you can hang your hat on a telephone pole!"

"And yet," retorted the Kid in a tone that stung, "you rave because a head like that wants to do its own thinking!" He turned away to his horse, mounted and stared down at his father who stared back. For a moment he seemed on the verge of speech; then, with a touch of his spurs, he wheeled the bay horse and went galloping furiously down the pasture trail, weaving in and out among the willow clumps and never once looking back.

CHAPTER FIVE

PARTS UNKNOWN

THE Happy Family was inclined to make light of the storm. Kids took funny streaks sometimes, they averred, and the only danger lay in taking them too seriously. Chip, whose blood still boiled from the encounter, openly bewailed the fact that the Kid was too big to take a licking, which was plainly what he deserved. Even the Little Doctor for once failed to champion his cause. He was at that difficult age, she declared, when a boy's disposition underwent a change to match his voice and became uncertain and not to be endured except that one knew it was a temporary affliction. Claude would be all right if he were left alone for awhile.

It was with the tacit agreement to leave him alone that they decided to drive over to Cal Emmett's place, all of them, in the two closed cars. Chung, the Chinese cook, would look

after J. G. for a couple of hours, and the Kid would have a chance to calm down.

But the Kid had no intention of calming down, in the sense they meant. The Kid was for once doing exactly what his father told him to do, and showing an unwonted zeal in the doing. He was just finishing the packing of his belongings on Sunup when he heard the two cars go laboring up the hill in second gear and guessed where they were going. It suited him very well, because now he would not need to take a roundabout course out of the coulee so as to avoid being seen, as he had intended to do. Furthermore, he could do something before he left which the presence of his father and mother would have made impossible. So he mounted and rode back up to the stables, his two packed horses swinging into the trail behind him and trotting docilely along at Stardust's heels. The Kid turned them into an empty corral and walked up to the house.

"Well, good-by, Uncle J. G.," he said with forced cheerfulness. "I'm pulling out for parts unknown, and I don't know when I'll see you again, so — "

"Parts unknown, ay?" The Old Man

looked at him from under his grizzled eyebrows. "That means you don't know yourself, or that you ain't going to tell?"

The Kid colored and turned his gaze aside.

"That I don't want to tell, I guess. I don't want the folks to know and put up a holler about it." He glanced questioningly into the Old Man's eyes. "I suppose you heard about the row."

"Didn't get the straight of it," grumbled the Old Man. "Don't s'pose they did either, for that matter. What happened?"

"O-h — " the Kid spoke reluctantly " — I got into a nest of blind canyons, down here toward the river, and couldn't get out for about twenty-four hours, is all. Mother and Dad had me down for a major break — "

"Hey?"

"They think I stayed away just to be mean, and Dad and I can't seem to agree anyway, so I'm pulling out."

"Where to? No reason why you shouldn't tell *me,* is there?" The Old Man's shrewd eyes bored for the truth. "Ashamed to tell, ay?"

"No, it isn't that. But the folks seem to hate the idea of letting me grow up. They want to

keep me depending on them for everything, even my opinions. Because I insist on doing my own thinking and planning my own life, they're in a blue funk. They can't or won't follow my mental processes, so they think I must be going straight to the devil. Dad's idea is to keep me out of school and make me work here on the ranch to learn what he calls sense. Mother wants me to be a doctor, and if I won't be a doctor school is going to spoil me. They stand together on one point: If I won't do what they want me to do with my life, they're not going to educate me. I don't know where they get that stuff — well, yes, I do, but it's all out of date, choosing your child's career while your child is in the cradle. It's the bunk. People of their intelligence ought to be ashamed to hold such archaic theories.

"Well, the point is, I'm going on and finish my University course, and I'm going to pay my own way. I meant to go into all this with the folks and tell them my plans, but this row kind of changes things. I'm perfectly willing to look after myself from now on, so I'm going to rustle the money to carry me through till next year."

"Far as the money's concerned — "

"No, I can't let you dig up enough to — no, not a dime, Uncle J. G. I can handle this alone, thanks just the same. That wouldn't get me anywhere in the long run. I'd still be letting some one else carry me when I'm well able to use my own legs. No, I'm going to pay my own way from now on. I can, all right — "

"How?" demanded his uncle, eyeing him curiously. "Goin' to rob a bank, ay?"

The Kid grinned and sat down on the edge of the table, thrusting his long legs straight out before him and folding his arms in a gesture of standing pat upon his own decision.

"I see I'll have to come clean," he surrendered. "Well, I've inherited some things I never will get out of my blood, I guess. You've got it, Dad's got it — call it the Western spirit. That's as good a term as I can think of now. I'm all West, all for the open and horses and all that goes with them. The boys wail because the old days are gone, but they don't realize the new days are not so bad. We've brought out of the old West the same spirit, only we express it in a slightly different way. We still love the open and we still

love horses. It used to be all in the day's work; now it's the one all-American sport we have.

"The boys sneer at our contests and rodeos, but that's sheer prejudice, Uncle J. G. They've let themselves get out of touch with the real West, so they think it doesn't exist. But it does, and it has bred a sport that is worth any man's best efforts." The Kid paused, bent a questioning, wistful gaze upon his uncle.

"I've never talked about it," he said, after a hesitating moment, "but I was going to put it up to the boys when they came — till I saw what their reactions are toward us young fellows. Now, of course, I'll have to go it alone. It's a disappointment to me, but on the whole I'd just as soon put it over alone.

"What I'm working on, Uncle J. G., is the organization of a Western Contest team of riders and ropers. Fellows that will be under regular athletic training rules that gives them much more speed and endurance than is possible in the haphazard way most of them live now. With a coach, too, that knows the game. Get the idea, Uncle J. G.? One good clean bunch of real athletes will do more to lift our Western sports up to the level of baseball and

football than anything on earth. And it certainly needs to be lifted to where the American public will stand back of it. People love horsemanship, racing and skillful riding. My idea is to combine athletics with our Wild West stunts, make the public see that here is our real American sport — the only one on earth that has grown out of an American industry!

"One good clean, fast team will convince them and bring others into existence. There'll be leagues, some day, contesting against each other. Riding clubs of the East can take it up — nothing to prevent any good horseman from learning the game — we've kept the East from thinking so, with our chaps and big hats and six-guns mostly! England might take it up too. More fun than riding to hounds, I should think. Each team would wear its own colors — " He flushed, took a quick breath and went on:

"The way it is now, too many people in the East believe we're all rough and tough out here. We've given ourselves the name of being ignorant, illiterate. It's time we taught the world that a man may be college-bred, qualified to hold a place in polite society and

still be able to ride a bucking bronk to a standstill. I — I want to make bronk riding and steer wrestling and roping respected — accepted the world over as an American sport — have the East as well as the West proud of it, loyal to it. I want to put Wild West contests right up alongside polo!"

"Kid-glove contests, ay?" commented the Old Man shrewdly, thereby proving to the boy that he had at least made himself fairly understood.

"Put it that way if you want to. Anyway, that's what I've staked out as my particular ambition, and that's what I'll be working toward from now on. I began it last year, for that matter. Laramie's a good place to start. They've got the background our first contest team will need. You know they call their football team the Cowboys, don't you? Some of the most prominent rangemen in the West graduated from that University years ago. I've got four fellows in training, on the quiet — not letting on what we're aiming at. And that's what I got my three horses for. I rode at Cheyenne last year when I spent vacation down there at Walt Myers' ranch. I — don't ever tell, will you? — I entered as Montana

Kid, and won second money in the bucking contest, first in fancy roping, second in the relay — and that's the money I bought Stardust and Blazes with. I knew Dad would raise a holler if he knew it, and Mother thinks contests are terribly roughneck, so I never said anything.

"This year I've got the best relay string in the West; I'll bet money on that. They're fast, and they're trained to stand at their stations till the saddle's on and I'm up. They won't stampede like most horses. I trained them last winter, with these boys I told you about. Luckily, the race track is close by the campus so we could get out there whenever the weather was fit and work out our strings. The boys have entered at Cheyenne this summer, but I couldn't on account of the folks coming on from the Coast. If I'd known as much as I know now," he added bitterly, "I'd have stayed away; I'd rate higher with Dad and the rest if I hadn't come home at all this summer."

"You been uppity," the Old Man told him bluntly. "Too dog-gone uppity to get along with anybody. You can't blame 'em — much."

"They hit me wrong, first thing. We

couldn't seem to get together on anything. I wanted them just as they used to be, I guess — and they didn't want me at all. Oh, well — I've got to be going, Uncle J. G. Point is, I've got a prospect of making a nice little stake before school starts in the fall. I'm sure of winning the relay race, and I think I've got a good chance — "

"So you're going to Cheyenne, ay?"

"No." The Kid shook his head regretfully. "It's too late now — I couldn't make it if I flew."

"There ain't any other contest close enough, is there?" The Old Man was studying him with the old keen attention which the Little Doctor would have given much to see in his face.

"Oh, there are some local ones here and there, but I can't afford to chase them up. Chicago's where they'll hang up the big purses this year; a thousand dollars for first money on the bronk riding, and from that on down. I hear they're offering good day-money — a hundred dollars and on down, on the relay race." As if the thought of it impelled him to action, the Kid stood up and settled his hat for riding. "Well, good-by, Uncle J. G.

[Take care of yourself, and don't tell the folks anything I've said, will you?"

"I'm gittin' hard of hearin'," the Old Man told him dryly. "You never told me yet where you're goin' or when yuh figure on gittin' back — how you fixed for money, ay? Think you can live on faith?"

"Oh, I've got a little — enough to see me through, I guess. That Stardust horse of mine won me a race or two this spring, and I hung on to the money; had a hunch the parental ax would fall if I stuck to my plans. Thanks, just the same. You're a good old scout, do you know it? When I get a training ranch you can come and help run it."

"Don't go breakin' your dog-gone neck — " The Old Man's voice broke unexpectedly as the Kid gripped his hand and turned away, and the Kid stumbled in the doorway, his eyes suddenly blurred.

At the top of the hill, just before he rode out of sight, the Kid pulled up and waved his hat high over his head, watching the house far below him. Something white — a newspaper, he guessed — fluttered from the window where the Old Man had been sitting in his wheel chair. The Kid blinked, bit his un-

derlip long and painfully and rode on toward the goal he had fixed for himself far down the gray miles and into the future that beckoned.

CHAPTER SIX

ONE OF THOSE COWBOYS

"HELLO, Cowboy! Going to take in the rodeo?"

The Kid looked up from filling a zinc bucket from the hose at a shiny new service station, nodded into the slant sun rays of late afternoon and glanced back to his work. The bucket filled, he carried it over to where his three horses stood bunched on the gravel parking, lifted and held it while Stardust, flaring his nostrils with eagerness, snuffed at the water and then drank thirstily. The man who had hailed him from the big car that had just limped in with a bent spike in its tire watched him smilingly for a moment and then, as if irresistibly impelled to come closer, climbed from the car and sauntered up.

"My, how I love to watch a horse drink!" he observed. "You just know it hits the spot when you see the swallows go sliding down.

You don't mean to be late for the show, do you, Cowboy? I think you'll probably be the first one on the ground."

"Well, I think probably I've been the longest on the road of any one, for that matter." For the first time the Kid turned his attention full upon the man. "How far is it from here to Soldier's Field?"

"From here to Soldier's Field? I don't just — oh, Parks!" he called to the chauffeur who was conferring with a white-garbed mechanic. "How far is it from here to Soldier's Field, about?"

"Twenty — about thirty miles, sir, I should say it was." His eyes went curiously to the horses before he returned to the tire trouble that occupied him.

"Thirty miles — I thought it would be about that. Take you about all day to-morrow, won't it, Cowboy?"

"Yes," sighed the Kid, "and then some. These slick pavements and the traffic slow us down like the very deuce. It will take the better part of two days, I expect." He turned with the empty bucket to refill it for the next thirsty throat, and the man stood stroking Stardust's sleek neck with the unmistakable

look of one who loves horses. As the Kid returned the man gave a little chuckle.

"Do you mind telling me, Cowboy, why you didn't say 'slows' and 'best'?" he asked quizzically.

"Slows and best?" The Kid stared. "I didn't know that was required of me."

Whereupon the other chuckled again and patted the Kid reassuringly on the arm with his modishly gloved fingers.

"You're all right, Cowboy — where are you from?"

"Montana. Up near the Bear Paws."

"You don't mean to tell me you rode horseback all the way from Montana?"

"No; as a matter of fact, I didn't ride horseback all the way." The Kid was busy now with Blazes and did not look up. "I woke up one morning in Bismarck in the rain, and had a swift mental picture of the four of us sloshing through the mud all day, so I blew myself to a truck for a couple of hundred miles. Aside from that we trailed through. We've been on the road since the day after the Fourth."

"Sounds funny to me — the language you use. You look like a cowboy, all right, but you

don't talk like one." The man's twinkling blue eyes rested thoughtfully upon the Kid's face.

"We have schools out West, and a few of us can read and write," the Kid rebuffed him.

"Now, I didn't mean a thing, Cowboy, except that I'm kind of homesick for the lingo and you don't speak it."

"Oh, well, I *can,*" drawled the Kid, and went for another bucket of water.

"Why don't you hire a truck to take you the rest of the way in?" the man suggested, when the Kid returned and was watering Sunup. "You're going to have pretty heavy traffic from here on, Cowboy. Be too bad if these ponies got hurt after all those miles to get here."

"Yes, but it would be worse if they didn't get their oats every day," the Kid answered laconically. "These ponies are in the pink, because I've grained them three times a day ever since we started. They're my relay string, and this sorrel, Stardust, is the smartest rope horse in the country. A truck would be fine, but it isn't essential. We can make it the last thirty miles, I guess, after coming over a

thousand. I don't intend to get into the thickest of the traffic, anyway."

The stranger stood with a hand on Stardust's sweaty shoulder and eyed the Kid's face, tanned and grimed with the dust of plodding miles through the heat.

"Ever been in Chicago, Cowboy?" he asked suddenly, watching for a look into the Kid's eyes as he glanced up.

"No, but I can read the signs, I guess. That's how I got this far," the Kid retorted rather brusquely, and went for more water. The day had been blistering hot and the ponies were thirstier than he had realized.

"All ready, sir," the chauffeur announced at this moment, coming up and touching his cap in salute.

"Yes, Parks. Just wait in the car, will you?"

The Kid, coming up with his filled bucket, observed that the smooth, kindly tone carried that note of authority which simply eliminates any thought of disobedience. He had wondered if the man were not some rangeman luxuriating in civilization for a time, but now he knew better. City bred he was, in spite of his evident love of horses and his professed longing for the range dialect. As Stardust

thrust his nose deep into the cool water the Kid lifted his head and met full the steady gaze of the other. It was the suave stranger who first glanced away.

"Reading the signs won't help you much from now on," he said cheerfully. "They'll probably land you in the Loop, and you want to avoid that. If you'll permit me to advise you, you'll keep pretty well to the left, which will bring you out — wait a minute; I'll draw you a map so you can't go wrong."

Whereupon the man briskly produced a long envelope from an inner pocket, a fountain pen from another and, using the Kid's saddle for a desk, began to sketch streets and boulevards rapidly while he talked.

"You won't need this until you reach the city limits; then you take the first through street running north — forget the name of the confounded thing, but it'll be a main thoroughfare and you can't miss it. Keep on until you cross the river — North Branch. Keep right on until you strike Lincoln Avenue and follow that southeast to the junction of Sheridan Road and Clark. Keep straight on — alongside the park, that will be — turn to your left, still keeping the park on your left

hand to where it turns left the second time; see? Right here you leave the park and keep straight on, up Michigan Ave. If you take it early in the morning it won't be so bad — just busses, mostly. Follow Michigan right along south — well, a good landmark will be the Central Station, facing you at the terminal of all the sunken tracks running alongside you. Turn to the left in front of the station, across the tracks; then to your right, down past the Field Museum — can't miss it — the stadium will be staring you in the face and there you are!"

"Well, thank you a lot," grinned the Kid. "Thousands of folks have stopped me to satisfy their own curiosity and ask a million questions that didn't concern them, but you're the first to offer any tangible help. I surely appreciate it right now. I've been kind of worried about finding the darned place when I got to it."

"For heaven's sake, Dad!" an impatient young woman leaned from the car to call, "I thought you were in such a tearing rush to get back to the office!"

"Yes, just a minute, honey. Finish your book, why don't you?"

The Kid turned and looked that way, and the young woman stared back at him curiously.

"Oh, one of those cowboys," she said, exactly as if he were a black beetle with unusual markings which excited her aloof interest for a moment. "I might have known it was something of that sort."

Her father was hastily scribbling something across the face of the envelope. At her words he looked up at her, glanced at the Kid with a lowered eyelid and grinned as he signed his name and handed the envelope to the Kid.

"I'm a cowboy at heart," he remarked with a note of whimsical apology in his tone. "My family knows it and is afraid I may chuck everything some day, jump on my champing white charger and go galloping off to the plains with a pistol in each hand and a bowie knife in my teeth. Fact. They watch me like a hawk, don't they, Dulcie? She's watching to see that I don't kidnap one of the ponies and disappear over the horizon right now!" Then he returned to the Kid's affairs, tapping the envelope with his pen. "When you reach the stadium, just hand that note to the first man

who seems inclined to block your way. No reason why you should have the expense of boarding your horses outside somewhere — if the quarters aren't ready under the stadium they soon will be, and you tell them you want to keep your horses there. Tell them I said they were to let you pick yourself a place for them. They know me — some of them do. Just — "

"Dad! For heaven's sake!"

"Just show them this note. Good luck, Cowboy! Wish I could change places with you for awhile; maybe I'll get in on some of the fun later on. See you at the show — what's your name, Cowboy — just so I can give you a hand when they call it?" As if invisible hands plucked at him, the man edged toward the big car where his daughter's impatience compelled attention.

"Dad, if you aren't in a hurry, I am. I'm going out to dinner at six, and it's after four now. There'll be cowboys enough to stare at — the place will be flooded with them before long."

"Yes, yes — don't be so tyrannical, my dear. This is the *first* cowboy! Will you tell me your name, please?"

"Montana Kid," the first cowboy told him distinctly, raising his voice so that the girl could not fail to hear. "I'm shore proud to meet yo' all and I'm shore obleeged to yuh fer the map. I'll see yuh right soon ag'in, I reckon."

As if he understood and appreciated the Kid's drawling dialect, the man laughed, patted him on the shoulder and hurried over to where the girl waited with a little smile of disdain. The waiting chauffeur pulled open the door, touched his cap with two fingers and climbed in. The man looked back, waved his hand and smiled, and the car slid forward, gathered momentum as it reached smooth pavement and swiftly diminished in size to a shapeless black spot rapidly receding down the road.

The Kid gave Blazes and Sunup another bucket of water apiece, tied the bucket to Sunup's pack rope, picked up Stardust's reins and mounted, the lead rope of the other horses held loosely in his hand, now that they had reached the much-traveled ways where he must keep his small outfit well in hand. The envelope he had thrust into the pocket of his shirt, and he pulled it out now and

read the note as he jogged slowly down the highway:

To Whom it May Concern — Please extend what courtesies your rules will permit to this cowboy, who has come a long way and needs rest. Make him at home and see that the ponies have everything they need. Yours, J. N. Harlan.

The Kid read the note twice, frowning thoughtfully over the message. Must be pretty important, this J. N. Harlan, to give orders like that. The mayor, maybe — though he seemed too human and friendly for a mayor; somebody away up the list, anyway. In his long journey the Kid had learned to take the idle talk of strangers lightly, but this seemed different. He might not use the note at all, but the map would be a help — or at least he hoped that it would.

"I guess he meant well enough," he mused as he rode. "I've got no use for that sassy Jane he had with him, darn her picture! But the old boy's all right. Maybe it's lucky I happened along just as his tire went blooey."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE KID MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME

FOG and a drizzle of rain turned noon to a murky twilight on the day that the Kid rode halfway round the big oval of the stadium, looking for a gate that was open. Now and then a truck lumbered past him loaded with raw, new planks that waved a red rag dispiritedly from the swaying rear as they went on. Occasionally an empty vehicle came rattling to meet him. Taxis like yellow bugs scooted by, hurrying to cover somewhere beyond.

Finally a gate where a keeper consented to look him over with a sour expression and beckon to another man in a yellow slicker with whom he conferred in an undertone.

"Come around next week," the keeper growled their verdict. "Maybe by that time — "

The Kid had not meant to seek favors of any one, but he was cold and wet and his

money was nearly gone and he did not know where he would find a livery stable — he doubted whether there was such a place in the city. He unfolded the envelope and held it out in the desperate hope that it would work. The gatekeeper looked at it, made an inarticulate sound and gave the note to the man in the slicker.

"Better take him to Norm, I guess."

The slickered one nodded, handed back the envelope with a curious glance at the Kid and beckoned him to follow. Through dismal subterranean passages they went then, following the curve of the stadium, and paused before a door upon which the guide beat an uneven staccato. After an interval a face peered out.

"Norm in there? Ask him to come out a minute, will you?" While they waited, the slickered one swore plaintively at the weather. The door opened again and a tall, sleepy-eyed man stepped out.

"Here's a cowboy that Harlan wants us to take in. What'll I do with him?" The man in the slicker was evidently not the nature that beats around the bush.

"Harlan? He ought to know we ain't pre-

pared — " The envelope which the Kid extended cut short the sentence. He read and pursed his lips, puzzling over the situation.

"Well, I guess he can put his horses where the stables are going to be," he said finally. "You'll have it all to yourself, Cowboy, and you'll have to keep out of the way of the carpenters. You go show him, Pete — you know, up the other side of the main entrance to the arena. I'll call up and see if we can get some hay over here. S'pose they'll throw on a sack or so of grain, too. Nothing ready for the rodeo yet," he explained good-naturedly, turning to the Kid. "You're over a week too soon. Where you from?"

The Kid explained, feeling apologetic and out of place and a general nuisance all round, and Norm listened and nodded absently, as if after all it didn't matter in the least when there were so many things of far greater importance. Then he went on down other great echoing corridors, to emerge finally into the clamor of carpenters building stout pens just within the shelter of the huge grandstand. This bedlam they left behind them, turning into vast emptiness and gloom.

"I guess this is about as good as any place,"

Pete finally told him. "Here's where the stables are going to be, I know. I'll see you get hay and grain. Make yourself at home, Cowboy; pick yourself a spot and hang to it. The crowd will be drifting in next week."

"Can I have the privilege of working out a little on the track, after a few days?"

"After the fence is built, I don't know why not," Pete told him. "Not if you wait till the men aren't working; after five, say."

The Kid thanked him and began unpacking Blazes and Sunup. The other hurried off down the echoing, empty place, his slicker slapping against his legs with an eerie sound that won a slow, questioning snort from Stardust, gazing after him. The Kid listened too for a minute before he shrugged and turned back to his work, fighting off the mood of depression that seized hold of him.

Of course it wasn't what he had expected, he told himself over and over. It was like going to the theater hours ahead of the performance and waiting alone in the dusky auditorium until the stage hands come and the commonplace preparation of the stage begins. The hollow sound of the hammers meant only that the scene was being set for the big

show. They were getting the place ready for *him!* They were working backstage now, where next week he and all the others would be showing Chicago what they could do with horses and cattle and a bit of rope.

So he tried to whip up his enthusiasm, tried to thrill at the thought of being here at journey's end, where he had dreamed for months of seeing his dreams come true. But always in his dreams he had pictured the life, the color, the galloping to and fro in the arena, the shouts and cheers of the crowd. He had never dreamed of emptiness and chill, foggy drizzle, of silence save for the hollow sound of hammer blows in the distance. He told himself over and over how glad he was to have the place to himself, so that he and the ponies could rest. He remembered the weary plodding, mile after mile for days and days and days; the hot sun and the dust and the wind; the search for horse feed where only gasoline and oil were provided for travelers; the gabbling tourists in auto camps where he was sometimes compelled to stop for want of a better camp ground; the tearing himself from sleep when daylight came, the repacking, the plod, plod, plod down the endless

road. And here he was at the goal it seemed he never would reach. "Plenty early for the show" — Of course he was plenty early! It was exactly what he had wanted. Yet the great cemented caverns pressed upon his spirits. The hours lagged.

Hay came at last; a truckload of fragrant bales and a careless, cheerfully blasphemous driver who chewed gum and jabbed an iron hook into the bales and skidded them into a pile on the floor with muscular dexterity, then painted a wide arc on the distant walls with his headlights and went rumbling back into the outer world, leaving silence and dusk behind him. The Kid busied himself for awhile, dragging down bales and pulling them into a square within which the horses could be enclosed, there being no mangers yet and no projection to which he could tie them. He left them munching contentedly and went off to find Pete or Norm or some one and ask where and how he might cook a meal for himself, since no restaurants had manifested themselves in the neighborhood of the stadium when he arrived.

He wandered up and down and round and about, trying to discover the door upon which

Pete had knocked. Doors there were, plenty of them, but though he knocked until his knuckles were sore, none gave any response. He was trying to find his way back to the horses when he met Norm hurrying along the outer corridor where occasional windows let in a gray light. The Kid stopped him and asked his question. Could he build a fire and cook a meal, or how about it? Norm grinned.

"Against the fire ordinance. Some cop come along — good night. Here, I'll show where you can do light housekeeping and it's nobody's business so long as you don't blat it out. If I've got a key that'll fit — yep — here you are, Cowboy. You've got over a week free rent. Make yourself to home, but don't advertise it, or the stuff's off. Keep the key and turn it in to me or Pete when you're through. The gas is on, and water and lights — all you need is grub." He gave the Kid a sudden searching glance. "I've got no right to turn you in here, you know. But I guess you won't — being a friend of Harlan's — oh, that's all right! Glad to do what I can — G'by!"

He was gone, his footsteps echoing down the wide corridor, and the Kid was left stand-

ing just within a barnlike room with rows upon rows of white crockery staring from shelves along the wall, two big coffee machines blinking in the light Norm had snapped on overhead, a gas range fit for an ordinary hotel and a long, tin-covered table in the center of the room. The Kid gave a short hiccupy laugh. He and his lone frying pan!

But it was a place to cook, and the Kid was hungry. He wandered around until he found his horses again, gathered an armload of provisions and his frying pan and coffeepot, and made his way back to the kitchen and let himself in. Luckily he had stopped that morning at a grocery and bought bread, eggs, butter and a bottle of milk, and he still had coffee and bacon from farther back along the road. He therefore dined very well and in lonely state at one end of the tin-covered table, and felt so much better for it that it was not necessary to remind himself so often of his blessings. The fact that he was housed from the rain, that his ponies were feeding happily sheltered at their journey's end seeped in now to where the realization brought a glow of content.

The Kid Makes Himself at Home

At five o'clock the bedlam of hammers ceased down at the end of the arena where the chutes were going up. Hollow footsteps ceased also, and the distant rumble of trucks. A silence of the wilderness settled upon the place. But it was not the wilderness he knew, — this dim cavern of steel and cement; it affected him strangely, made him glad of the presence of the horses. That small group of hay bales was like a tiny isle in an uncharted sea. In the gloom he clung to it, secretly dreading to leave it even to cook his supper in the dismal room over there in the outer corridor. And as soon as he recognized that dread he gave a snort of disdain and started for the place with his flashlight.

No one had thought to show him where to turn on the lights, though he supposed there must be lights in the labyrinth. But with the white beam of his flashlight threading the darkness before him he found the room, unlocked it and went in, closing the door after him to shut out some of the cheerlessness that seemed to follow him. He ate hurriedly, washed plate and cup at the big sink, emptied and rinsed his coffeepot with cold water, turned out the light and made his way with

some difficulty back to the horses. It seemed a mile, in the dark like that.

With his blankets spread upon a shelflike niche in the pile of hay bales and the horses dozing in their pen beside him, the Kid tried to sleep. But the very silence of the place disturbed him. He lay there alert, listening for something — though what it could be he did not attempt to define. The small sounds close by — the sigh of a horse, the scrape of a hoof upon the cement floor — seemed only to accentuate the stillness beyond, press it more heavily upon his nerves. He caught himself holding his breath, straining his ears to hear something; which was useless and idiotic of course, since there was nothing to tempt even a rat to scamper down that black arcade.

The muffled hoot of an engine reminded him that the city lay huddled along the lake, but it could not lessen the loneliness of this great pile of masonry. And after the engine had quieted down and the silence returned thick and unbroken another sound — or it may have been that his nerves deceived his ears into imagining it — came whispering out of the blackness. The Kid was not certain, but he thought he heard some one moving along

the wall that stretched behind him, curving inward to the wide, sloping passage leading to the great pillared corridor that stretched curving away upon either side in that immense horseshoe which formed the stadium.

It might be the night watchman, though reason told him there would be no watchman on duty until there was something more to safeguard than a load of hay and a few piles of planks. Furthermore, a watchman would carry a light; and although he sat up and strained his eyes, not a glimmer showed in the inky blackness. It couldn't be a watchman, then. Perhaps it was nothing at all — or a drip, perhaps, if the roof leaked somewhere and it still was raining. But it did not sound like the drip of water — he thought of a leaky faucet and discarded the explanation. It sounded — or it felt, since nothing much could be heard — like some one moving stealthily along the wall, away back there.

After a few minutes he relaxed and lay down again. Whatever it was, the thing must have passed. Imagination, probably, the Kid told himself with some disgust, and snuggled under his blankets determined to sleep. The

folks at home would have reason for thinking him still a child, if they knew he was afraid of the dark! After awhile he did sleep, for the next he knew the sun, shining directly into the broad passage from the arena, filtered a gray light through the cavernous place where he lay.

The Kid sat up and looked back at the blank wall where he had fancied he heard the sly footsteps last night. All foolishness, of course; there couldn't have been any one there. But he had never owned such things as nerves — at least not consciously — and it was strange they should play that trick on him.

He got up and went out into the arena where the sun was almost standing on tiptoe to look over the fluted colonnade that crowned the opposite side. It was early, a beautiful morning. He would feed the horses, eat his own breakfast and then take them out in the arena for a little exercise before the workmen arrived. For a minute or two he stood gazing around him at the great tiers of seats, row upon row, and tried to picture what it would be like when the big show started. A vast slope flowered with faces — eyes staring

down upon him — thousands and thousands of eyes! Would he have stage fright, fail to do his best? The roar of applause — would the waves of it surge toward him in approval of his skill?

He turned back, thrilled at the spectacle which was to be; awed, trembling a little lest he fail somehow, do a little less than his best.

But when he went to cook his breakfast his thoughts jarred back to the present. For his coffeepot, that he had left standing on its nose of the drain-board of the sink, was on the stove a third full of coffee not quite cold. Of his half loaf of bread only the heel was left lying on the table, and when he counted he knew that three eggs had been taken from the carton.

Yet the door had been locked with one of those expensive Yale locks supposed to be burglar proof, or nearly so. Aside from the food nothing had been disturbed, so far as he could see. But some one had been in that room very late in the night and had helped himself to a meal. That furtive sound last night had not been imagination, then. Some one else had shared the stadium with him and had

been rather anxious that his presence should not be discovered.

In spite of himself, the Kid felt a queer prickling sensation at the back of his neck.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONTESTANT NUMBER ONE

THE Kid did not take his horses out to exercise them after breakfast. Instead of that, he made a complete and careful exploration of that vast and to him mysterious region beneath the stadium. From the kitchen he started toward the gate where he had entered, and tried every door he saw. Such rooms as were unlocked were empty, but not many could he look into. Much of the way the walls were blank. The outer windows were heavily barred, the great entrances tightly closed with steel doors. At long intervals, iron stairways went up to the seats, and here and there were inclines like tilted tunnels twisting upward. He did not try these yet; he wanted to see what lay on the ground floor.

When he reached the entrance to the head of the arena there were evidences in plenty of the work going on; piles of planks to in-

vestigate. It was a huge place. The farther side was more open than where he had been quartered, and here were other great piles of planks and posts. The corrals for the cattle and the wild horses would be here, he supposed. The rooms were not so many on this side, and none of them were locked. Dressing rooms, most of them were. But here the light was a little stronger because of the sunlight that streamed in through the windows. There was no trace of any one, though; deserted as an old tomb, and not much more cheerful.

He went back and climbed one of the main stairways to the very top, where he could look down on the arena and all the vast emptiness of the seats. Field Museum and the green slope before it lay smiling in the sun, and beyond the lake shone like a mirror reflecting the sky; but for these he had only a glance. He was wondering who had sneaked past him in the night, who had picked the lock on the kitchen door and helped himself to eggs and bread and coffee, and had been so careful to lock the door behind him again.

Chicago was a tough place, he had been told. But still, this empty stadium surely offered no inducement to violence; later, when

the big show was on, perhaps — but surely not now when it would take a truck to haul off anything movable.

"Aw, heck!" the Kid muttered at last as he turned to go down. "A thousand men could keep out of sight here if they wanted to, and I could walk the heels off my boots for all the good it would do me." And he went down the stairs and back to his horses. He was out in the arena, loping them easily around the track when trucks came clucking in and the carpenters appeared and began to throw planks down with hollow smacking sounds. Presently the hammers began pecking away and men went here and there on mysterious errands that seemed very important. And now that the outside world — or a small part of it — had flowed into the big silent coliseum, the presence of one unknown did not seem so important after all.

But he kept his horses picketed out in the center of the arena that day and practiced the intricate details of his rope-spinning tricks such as turning back somersaults within the whirling loop, standing on his head, rolling over and over on the ground and jumping in and out without once letting the spinning

rope fall. The eyes of the workmen turned often his way and lingered, watching and making comments, but the Kid never thought of that.

Norm stopped in his hurried walk across the end of the arena and looked on while the Kid performed one difficult feat, then grinned and passed on, waving a hand when he saw the Kid glance his way. The Kid let his loop fall to the ground while he stared after the other. Should he overtake him and tell him about that sly nocturnal meal? While he widened his loop again he debated the question with himself. Maybe he ought to — but Norm had enough on his mind without being asked to bother about some one who did no more than help himself to food.

"Aw, it's just some bum, probably," the Kid decided, as he hopped inside the spinning loop again for another stunt which he had invented that summer. Chicago was full of hoboes, naturally. Some one had sneaked into the stadium to get out of the wet. He would probably manage to sneak out with the workmen, and that would be the end of it. But he must be clever at picking locks.

When his arm ached from the exercise the

Kid inquired about stores, and went out and brought all the provisions he could carry in his arms, and what he did not need that day he left down in the pile of hay where he could be sure it was there in the morning.

That night he slept soundly as if he lay safe at the Flying U or in his frat house in Laramie, his last waking thought a half formed plan for the morrow. He must find out where he could get the horses reshod, the serviceable road shoes exchanged for the light racing plates that would give them more speed.

In the morning he found the same telltale sign of eating in the kitchen; but now a whole loaf was missing, and a pound of cheese he had forgotten to carry back with him after supper. So the fellow had not gone, after all; he was somewhere around and he must expect to stay for awhile, since he had thoughtfully provided himself with a lunch.

Once more the Kid made the round of the stadium, and this time he took off his boots and wore a pair of buckskin moccasins he had with him. It didn't help him any. He might as well have gone clumping up and down the corridors. Not so much as a mouse did he see.

He would have spoken to Norm about it that day, but he did not see him at all; nor Pete. From a truck driver he learned where he could have his horses shod, and with careful directions for finding the shop he started early for the place, glad of an excuse for leaving and taking his horses with him, even if it were only for a couple of hours. As a matter of fact it took five, but the job was well done and he was glad to have it over and to get his precious ponies back safe, away from the swift-flowing rivers of trucks, taxies and street cars that made the South Side a bedlam.

Another night with his horses, another morning when he unlocked the door of the big kitchen and found that some one had eaten and gone; another silent search of the huge place, fruitless as the first. The mystery would have irritated the Kid past endurance, had other things not crowded in upon his attention and taken his time.

The big rodeo — it was getting closer and closer, and the thrill of it pressed deeper and deeper into the heart of the Kid. They were building the high, wire fence all around the arena. There came a day when the Kid must

swing open a big gate just before the main entrance to the arena, so that he could lead his ponies in to the field. Every morning now he worked them out in the relay, hampered for lack of a helper, it is true, but putting the ponies through their paces and teaching them more and more carefully that they must stand until he was up. Every day he practiced roping, and now as the horses rested from the long journey, he used them as much as he could in his stunts. The carpenters came to the point of betting upon him — rashly, since they did not know what rivals he would have; but it pleased the Kid to have them praise him and his horses, made him feel a little more at home, a little more sure of himself.

One morning he woke to hear the hollow plaint of cattle lowing, and the shouts of men. Scrambling into his clothes and running down the passage, out through the big gate and across the arena toward the clamor, he was in time to see them go crowding down the echoing way to the stout corrals just finished the day before. High-shouldered, lean-flanked longhorns from the Brazos, these were. A tingle of excitement stirred the Kid's pulse at sight of them. He had no intention of

taking part in the riskier sports this year — bulldogging, bronk-riding, steer-riding — because he had too much at stake, needed money too badly. He meant to save his energy, concentrate on the roping, fancy and relay riding, and be the more certain of winning. He did not believe that a fellow should "spread himself" and try to compete in everything. That was one of his pet theories which he meant to try out in his team. But now he itched to tackle one of those husky brutes, just to see if he couldn't twist it down in about fifteen or twenty seconds.

Then the wild horses came; bucking bronks, outlaws culled from every contest in the country. Devils in horseflesh these were, showing the whites of their eyes as they flung up heads to glare at these strange gray walls that enclosed them; snorting, rearing, plunging down the passageway to their quarters. Wily, some of them, meek as plough horses until a man was in the saddle, then fighting demons, wanting only the chance to crush and kill. These, too, challenged the Kid's imagination. He wanted to top a few of the meanest, show them who was boss!

Soon there came trooping in the herd of

saddle horses, down the passage where the Kid's footsteps had echoed so hollowly. Clatter enough now as the horses were brought to their places before the long mangers which had been built against the front wall in the past two days. The Kid's little corral of hay bales was gone, swelling the pile that grew higher against the far wall as the trucks came clucking in with their loads. Stardust, Blazes and Sunup stood decorously now at the far end of the manger, in the place where the Kid decided they would be least disturbed as the other horses came and went.

Clean-limbed running horses for the relay race; roping horses — the Kid studied them one by one, jealous for his own. Two or three looked speedy enough to worry him a little if he did not know how well his own string was trained. Speed counted, of course. But behavior at the station where the saddle was changed counted quite as much. The Kid turned away from the inspection not much troubled; he had faith in his own string.

Tanned riders from the plains accompanied the stock, their laughter rising above the clatter of arrival, the last bustle of preparation. Saddles, "warbags," bridles, ropes, all

the paraphernalia of the range rider were carried in and dumped against the hay, wherever the owner decided to claim a few square feet for his own. The Kid's long solitude was over. These men spoke his language, greeted him as one of themselves, called him Kid without bothering to ask his name. Contest talk went on day and night; crap games too. And cards. Shouts, laughter, good-natured jibes, boasts of the money they would drag down. Tales of other contests where they had won — or if not, why not, with minute explanations which never, the Kid observed, included a lack of skill. Always the alibi; always the man himself was not to blame. Once or twice a bottle went surreptitiously from man to man, got no one seemed to know where or how, sampled in a spirit of deviltry.

The Kid watched them, listened to their talk, weighed them against his ideals and found them wanting. They wanted to win, every man of them. They were grimly determined to win. Some for the prestige, because they were contest riders by profession, some because, like the Kid, they needed the money and must have it. But all of them smoked, some of them chewed tobacco, the majority

never hesitated to take a drink of bootleg whisky if it was offered. Didn't they know they were shortening their wind and their endurance, placing a senseless handicap upon themselves in the contest? Fine fellows too. The Kid thought what a pity it was they were going at it by-guess-and-by-gosh, trusting to luck to break their way, when they ought to be under a coach, and made to live under regular training rules.

When his own boys came — Walt Myers, Beck and Dud and Billy if they could manage the expense of the trip — he'd be able to show these fellows, maybe, that clean living paid. In the meantime he kept his thoughts shut within himself, as was his habit — too much his habit, as his baffled parents could testify.

Another day or two, and headquarters rooms were opened off the passage next the big wire gate to the arena. Contestants began drifting in from every State that ever held open range for cattle. From morning until night the commotion in the passageway increased, high-keyed hilarious greetings more frequent. Entrants were being registered. "D'ja git y'r badge?" became the common-

est question asked, for the badges would be honored day or night at Gate Fifteen, and through some oversight the badges were not at hand. Fellows who went out were not getting back in so easily and it worried them.

The Kid did not add his voice to the confusion; all the others had found friends, his casual acquaintances had turned their attention to others with whom they had more in common. A silent young fellow who would not even smoke a cigarette with them was bound to be overlooked when old cronies appeared. He looked on as from a distance, wondering if his own crowd would show up. He had written Walt from Bismarck, but he had not been able to give any specific address where a reply would reach him and he would simply have to wait, he supposed. He hoped if they did come they would have plenty of money with them. The entrance fees were higher than he had dreamed they would be; to shut out the pikers, some one had told him. They had very nearly shut out the Kid, for though he had saved a hundred and twenty-five dollars for the purpose and for living expenses during the rodeo, the events he chose had taken all but five dollars of it—

and it was still two days to the opening! He couldn't enter the bronk riding now if he wanted to, and for that reason perhaps he was secretly wild to try it, even in the face of the world's champion who was there to defend his title, and half a dozen other lesser lights who were openly determined to wrest it from him. Crazy notion, perhaps, but the Kid began to wish he had chosen that instead of the calf roping, which cost about the same.

He was standing gloomily in the crowd just within the door of the office when some one laid a hand on his shoulder and whirled him half around. For a minute the Kid's pulse leaped, thinking it was one of the boys from Laramie; but it was Harlan's smooth, boyish face that smiled into his.

"How's the first cowboy? Have you got yourself all fixed up for the events? You know," he lowered his voice to a confidential undertone, speaking close to the Kid's ear, "if you're a little short — some of the boys are, I know — and need help in paying the entrance fee, I can arrange that for you; as a loan to come out of your winnings. Don't be afraid to say so — "

"No-o — " the Kid shook his head, "thanks

just the same, Mr. Harlan. I've already entered for the relay race, the calf roping, the fancy riding and the trick roping; that's enough to keep me stepping, and if I make good in them I'll be satisfied." But in his heart he knew that wasn't true. He wasn't satisfied at all. He wanted to bulldog, and he wanted to ride the bronks. But more than that he wanted to be independent, with no help from any one. And his common sense told him that if he did justice to the four events he had chosen he must not waste his energies on any of the others.

"Well, just as you say, Cowboy. Have you got your badge? They've just come — sorry there was a delay in getting them over here, but you know how it is; a million things to attend to — Come over to the desk with me." Still holding the Kid by the arm he led him over to the desk where a harassed young woman was trying her best to attend to the chorus of questions and demands from insistent, tanned young men who surged up. These, Harlan pushed aside with little ceremony, though with a certain gracious air that disarmed resentment, and leaned confidentially over the desk.

"Miss Gray, have you started giving out the badges yet? You haven't given out Number One yet, have you?"

Miss Gray, running a pencil rapidly down her list of names, assured him she had not.

"We must find Number One for this young man. He was first, and he's entitled to it. Look through the box, will you, Miss Gray?" His soft, friendly voice urged her to eager searching, and his soft, shapely fingers dipped investigatively into the box. "Two? No, that won't do. This boy was first, and I'm determined he shall — " He broke off as his fingers closed over the badge he sought.

"There you are, Cowboy! Contestant Number One! That's you on the bucking horse, see? Or we'll say it is, anyway. Pin it on you and good luck to you! A boy that'll ride all the way from Montana — how are the ponies? Folks here treat you right? Have everything you needed?"

"More," grinned the Kid, thinking of his mystery. "I don't know how I shall ever thank you, Mr. Harlan — "

"Never mind the thanks — you can do a little favor for me, though. What I hunted you up for, really." He led the Kid to one

side, and out another door into the passageway. "I'm so busy, looking after things, and my daughter insists on seeing all the horses and cattle — everything there is to see. Some club idea, I believe. The committee is rushing to have everything ready — do you mind taking her around and showing her everything?"

The Kid gave an involuntary start that came near being a shudder.

"Why — I'll be glad to show her around if you like, Mr. Harlan," he lied, wondering why nice men must have daughters.

Breathing gratitude and good will, Harlan hurried him off to where daughter waited.

"I've found you a guide, Dulcie; the cowboy we met on the road that day. He'll take you around wherever you want to go, and when you're through just come to the office, and wait for me if I'm not there." Whereupon he gave the Kid a final pat on the shoulder and hurried off after a big, flushed man who apparently bore the weight of the world on his shoulders, he looked so harassed.

A pert little slip of a girl, in a smart gray tailored skirt and jacket, white silk blouse and white hat; eyes wide and a baffling

greenish-brownish-gray, with an upward inquiring look wholly disarming at first glance, but afterward — eyes that dared man and devil alike. A manner demurely assured, and a mouth capable of adapting itself unerringly to the mood of the moment.

The Kid's smoky gray eyes appraised her swiftly and looked away down the corridor where Harlan had already disappeared, his hand in the crook of the big man's arm.

CHAPTER NINE

DULCIE HARLAN LOOKS AROUND

"WHAT do you want to see first, Miss Harlan?" The Kid somewhat doggedly turned himself to the task before him.

"Everything. All of it. I want," she said frankly, "to see what there is about it to hypnotize Dad the way it does."

The Kid might have told her that a capacity for appreciation of what lay back of the rodeo would be necessary for that, but he did not want to start a discussion and so he made no reply whatever. Instead he turned and led her down past the spiral tunnel and down the passage that ended at the chutes, all new and yellow and smelling of fresh lumber. They were empty now and deserted, though soon they would be the focus to which a hundred thousand eyes would be drawn. The Kid could not expect her to thrill to that thought, as her father would.

"This is the line of chutes where they saddle the horses," he said simply, and led her

on to the stout plank corrals of the bronks, and told her they were the bucking horses.

"Why, they look gentle and nice!" she exclaimed. "What is it you do to the poor things to make them buck?"

"Do?" For the first time the Kid was betrayed into looking at her straight. "Why, nothing except crawl on and try to stay. What did you think we did?"

"I've heard of all sorts of vile things that Dad says aren't true. Brads in the saddle skirts, acid on their backs — "

"Say!" the Kid's eyes flamed. "Do these horses look as if they'd had things like that done to them? They've been in other contests this summer — you don't see them scarred up, do you? Not even spur marks. Sleek as seals, every one of them."

She stood on her patent-leather slipper toes and peered between the planks. The Kid, breathing hard with indignation, watched her. Brads in the saddle skirts, eh? It was as if she had accused him personally of such a deed.

"Say, I'd like to know where you get that stuff!"

"Why, the antis, of course. And you choke

poor little calves almost to death, and slam them down and bust them, and the poor steers that you torture until they fall in agony — why, the papers are full of the horrors — " Her big eyes gazed at him with such reproach the Kid could have shaken her.

"And you believe that blah? Say, listen a minute!" The Kid took a long breath and spoke at length and straight from the shoulder while she stood leaning back against the wall and watched him wide-eyed. "And that's what you do to the greatest American sport we have to-day — the only *all*-American sport we've got!" he finished hotly.

"You talk just like Dad," she told him. "But the antis say that's all blah too, as you call it. Can you tell me you don't think these poor horses would be gentle if they were treated with kindness and consideration?"

"Kindness and con — Say!"

The Kid was off again for another five minutes or so. She waited patiently until he had finished and came back with other idiotic charges which had to be refuted. All in all, they were two hours and more in making the round, and they became personal and abusive before they were half through.

"And your father calls you Dulcie!" the Kid exclaimed exasperatedly after a particularly sharp jab of her sarcasm.

"Oh, don't let that worry you, calf-choker. Dulcinea is in memory of a much-prized great-grandmother and is not meant to mislead any one concerning my nature."

"One is not easily misled, so long as you're able to speak, Miss Harlan."

That seemed to please her, though the Kid had certainly not intended it so.

"And now, I want to go again to the chutes where you dreadful cowboys shoot the poor bronks to make them buck," she said. "You're holding out on me, anyway. I've only been around one side. Let's go back past the chutes where they shoot — "

"Say, you know perfectly well that's not true — " And then he stopped, brought up short by the realization that she was laughing at him. He saw it in the gleam of her eye, in the furtive little dimple beside her mouth, just glimpsed before it vanished.

"You've been kidding me all along," he charged sternly. "I'm the original dumb-bell or I'd have known you were just trying to get a rise out of me."

"Not necessarily. Perhaps your experience with girls is limited," she suggested, trying him further.

"It sure is," the Kid bluntly admitted. "Girls simply don't rate with me, that's all." An ungallant remark made more so by his absolute sincerity.

"And yet, it's just possible that you don't rate with girls," she struck back with velvet sweetness.

"Maybe I don't — I never noticed." The Kid turned impatiently from this purposeless sparring. "But even if you've been kidding, you must have had something to go on. You didn't think up all that cruelty stuff out of your own head, did you?"

"I should say not! Don't you read the papers? Didn't you know there's been a fight to stop this brutal, senseless rodeo? That's what the antis call it," she explained. "They've been making a terrible row about it. They say it's worse than bull fights. Commercialized cruelty, they call it; not sport but a brutal exhibition of all the savage instincts of man. Where have you been, that you don't know about it?"

"Why, it's a — a rotten lie! It — "

"Yes, you told me all that," Miss Dulcie interrupted. "But you're one of the — the — "

"Savages," he supplied darkly.

"Thank you; one of the savages they're howling about. Dad's a savage who likes to look on." She turned her head and looked up into his handsome, gloomy face, and for a moment met his eyes with resentful questioning.

"So you see," she said finally, "you're both prejudiced in your own favor. What you say is bound to be more or less colored with your own ideas. I've heard so much of the other side that I'd want something more convincing — "

"Then you weren't kidding?"

"Not altogether. Perhaps scarcely any. It does seem brutal and — and savage."

"No more so than any other sport. How about polo? How about racing? A bucking horse bucks because he wants to, same as a running horse loves to run and a polo pony loves the game. If you're going to spread around the sympathy," he said impatiently, "the riders need more than the horses, seems to me. Bronk riding is a darned sight harder on the man than it is on the horse."

"Well, that's his own affair. The horse doesn't make the man ride, does he?"

"He sure does!" The Kid laughed shortly, twisting her meaning with deliberate intent. "A man's got to ride if he stays aboard."

"But he doesn't have to get in the saddle!"

"Oh, no — a man doesn't *have* to do anything, much, unless he wants to. He can eat and sleep and call that living, if he likes. But if a man's a rider he can't be satisfied to let any horse on earth throw him off. And there are horses that are just as proud of not letting any man on earth stay on their backs. So there you are; the game is to see which wins, the man or the horse."

"And you, being a rider, are going to kick and strike those poor horses to make them buck, and be terribly proud if by any chance you are able to stay on their backs?"

"You said it."

"Well, I hope they throw you off, Mr. Montana Kid. I shall *pray* that every horse you force to buck throws you off!"

"Don't figure too much on getting those prayers answered, then, because I'll certainly be right there on top when the whistle blows!"

"So you say. And I suppose you mean to

choke those poor little calves and bust them?"

"Oh, sure! Why do you think I rode all the way from Montana, except to do all these brutal things?"

"I only wish we had the privileges extended to the old Romans, of turning thumbs down — "

"Your thumbs would be purple from the rush of blood to the nails, I suppose. Nice, gentle little savages, aren't you?"

"It isn't savage to want to protect poor dumb animals — "

"By slaughtering all the poor dumb cowboys?"

"I can see you mean to be sarcastic," she said blandly, "but you are merely following my line of thought. I am not savage; I am merely standing up for the right."

"Well, you must know you aren't standing up very high, at that," he jeered, giving her a patronizing smile because her hatcrown did not rise above his shoulder.

"Oh, I haven't a doubt you'll go a lot higher when you get on a bucking horse!"

"That," he told her loftily, "remains to be seen."

"Oh, I expect to see it, all right! I shall

come every day just to see how high they throw you!"

"Don't strain your eyes looking to see me thrown! Here's the office where your father told you to wait for him."

"Why, I haven't seen — "

"Sorry, Miss Harlan. I'm busy right now. You want to save your energy, anyway, for the rodeo. You'll need it." If she thought he was going to lead her around all afternoon, just for the fun of hearing her razz him!

"Good-by, Montana Kid," she said sweetly. "See you in the funny papers — riding a bronk!"

"Have a good laugh," cried the Kid, and lifted his hat with jaunty unconcern as he walked briskly away and left her to bark her own knuckles knocking until some one opened the door.

"Darn her picture!" he muttered furiously to himself the next minute. "Now I've got to go borrow fifty dollars and enter the bronk riding. Darn lucky thing she forgot to razz me about bulldogging!"

For that, as you know, is the way of youth.

CHAPTER TEN

RODEO

"WHAT yuh lookin' for, Kid?" A short, smiling-faced young man in an enormous hat and silver-conched, bat-wing chaps that made him look shorter than he really was, strolled over to where the Kid was frantically pawing through a big leather suitcase. "Want to git a move on yuh, Cowboy. The grand entry's goin' to start purty soon. Lost somethin'? Your nerve, maybe?" The short young man spread his legs a little, from sheer exuberance of spirits because of the expansive chaps and certain other resplendent details of his gala attire.

"I've lost a blue satin shirt," the Kid replied without looking up. "I know it was here the other day — "

"Say, you got it on!" chortled the short one. "I golly, yuh shore must be all up in the air, Cowboy — that blue satin shirt's on yore back!"

"I know, but I had six. I'm wearing blue, this contest. I ought to have five here, and there's only four. Some sneak thief has been through my grip and helped himself to a shirt. But he can't get away with it," the Kid added grimly, closing and locking the grip. "This particular shade of blue is not made up in factory shirts, as I happen to know. I chose the cloth myself, and had three dozen shirts made to order. I know where they are — all except the one missing out of my suitcase. So whoever took my shirt had better keep it off his back — "

"Hol-ee cats! Thirty-six sky-blue-pink satin shirts!" The short cowboy leaned against a concrete pillar and fanned himself with his hat. "Who are you, fer gosh sake? The Prince of Wales?"

The Kid grinned in spite of his perturbation.

"No. Five of us fellows took a notion to dress alike, and this queer shade of blue is the color we chose for shirts. We got enough cloth for six apiece, and that's all we could find like it. The other boys aren't here, so if you see a shirt the color of this one I've got on, Shorty, and I'm not inside it, just grab

the guy, will you, and hold him till I get there!"

"Yeah. Oh, shore!" Shorty spoke with elaborate sarcasm. "Say, most of us guys is tickled to git *one* satin shirt, Boy, let alone six. You better go git a locker for such valuables as them. Got yer hoss ready? You better be steppin', now I'm tellin' yuh. We all gotta ride down to the Injun camp and start from there. Some uh the boys is already down there. An' say-ay, there's a million people banked up all around the stadium, and the stream is still runnin' bank full at the gates! I been in every contest worth goin' to, and I never seen so many folks, honest. See yuh later, Chief Many Blue Shirts. I gotta go. There's a little girl entered for the relay that shore takes my eye, Cowboy! If my hoss don't step right alongside hers in the grand entry, it'll be the sorriest show you ever seen!" Shorty tilted his hat a little farther over his left eyebrow and started off, silver conchos glittering on his wide-winged chaps. Ten feet down the hay-littered space behind the saddle horses the Kid saw him stop and spread his arms to head off some one coming full tilt from the main passage.

"Whoa, there! Not so fast, young 'n! Yore paw an' maw 'll shore paddle yore pants if yuh don't git back outa here. Somebuddy'll be steppin' on yuh, shore!"

"Aw, fer the cryin'-out-loud! Lemme past, you drugstore cowboy! I guess I know what I'm doin'," a clear, boyish voice cried indignantly.

The Kid had just completed hiding his suitcase under a haypile as some slight protection against further depredations. He whirled and started incredulously toward the voice, gave a gasp and swooped down on Boy, who had just kicked and wriggled himself free of Shorty's detaining grasp. Boy rushed and grabbed the Kid's arm, laughing hysterically.

"Hello, I knew I'd find you some place around; how's the horses?" The words fairly overlapped each other in the relief Boy's tone betrayed. "Gosh, ain't this a big place, Kid? I bet I've been a whole solid hour lookin' for you in here. I been walkin' *miles*. Then I seen a big tall man that looked like Tex Austin's picture, and I asked him where Montana Kid was liable to be, and he said he was liable to be anywhere but to look down in here, so I

did. And say, Kid, Weary and Pink and Mig's here and Andy Green, and they're goin' to take movin'-pitchers and Mig said maybe I can be in 'em. I never told 'em I bet you was here — I guess they'll just about fall over when they see you! But I knew you was here, all right. I knew here was right where you'd aim for when you left the ranch. But I never said a word to anybody. I just let 'm talk. Gosh! I nearly busted myself trying not to laugh when they wondered where you was. Your folks thinks you went down to Walt Myers' place in Wyoming, but I guess the Old Man kinda s'specks something, 'cause I seen a funny look in his face once er twice — "

Bewilderedly the Kid shook him into a gasping suspension of speech.

"Now let's get a line of things," he said in an unsteady voice. "How in heck did you get here, Boy? That's what I want to know."

"Why, with the folks, a course. Uncle J. G. said he was a comin' to Chicago, and the folks thought he was woozy, and he kep' on saying he was comin' to the rodeo, and he wanted to see the boys make movin'-pitchers here, and so your dad got my dad to look after the

ranch, and him and your mother and the Old Man got ready to come, and then I was bound I was comin' too, and I made such a fuss they had to let me. And they're right up here in the grandstand, right about over our heads, I guess, but they don't know you're — "

"Just a minute, Boy!" The Kid lunged forward after a flicker of blue which showed for a minute down toward the entrance. "Walt! Hey, Walt!" He whistled a peculiar, shrill note or two, and three blue-shirted figures detached themselves from the troubled stream of men and saddled horses and made for him. Speechless, almost in tears, the Kid pummeled them in savage joy. They had come, after all! He had asked every man he saw who hailed from Wyoming, and no one had known anything about Walt Myers and his crowd — except that they had contested in Cheyenne with no great success. He had given up hope of their coming, and here they were, just in time for the grand entry! To the Kid, their timely arrival bore all the earmarks of a miracle.

"Now you can tend station for me in the relay!" he cried, when incoherencies had merged into clear thought and speech. "I got

a couple of fellows lined up, but you know the ponies and they know you, and I'll feel a lot easier. What you entered for? Say, where's Dudley?"

"Dud broke his leg in Cheyenne," Walt told him rapidly, wanting to say a great deal in a very short time. "We came on in Beck's car, and the darn thing kept falling apart — just got in this morning. Beck's entered for bareback riding, steer riding and the wild-horse race. I'm roping, bulldogging and riding bronks. Billy was going to relay, but we didn't get here in time to see about a relay string, so he's trick roping, riding bronks and steers, bareback and bulldogging. Couldn't find you, Kid, to see how you wanted us placed, so we had to line up best we could. Beck's entered for all but the bronk riding — we ran out of cash for the fee. Say, they're sure steep, aren't they?"

"Sure are. I'm flat, after entering. Too bad about Dud; I wanted him to trick ride on Sunup. Walt, you and Billy help me in the relay. I start with Stardust, and Beck can lead him back and rub him down, ready for the calf roping. Then — "

"Everybody get ready for the grand entry!"

shouted a big man on horseback, coming down the line. "Mount and ride down to the gate by the Indian camp. Grand entry starts in ten minutes! Get your horses ready for the grand entry!" He rode on, his glance going this way and that, looking for delinquents.

"Got horses for the parade, boys?"

"You bet! All saddled. Couldn't take a chance on being left out in the cold, so we didn't try to find you first thing."

Boy pushed into the group, his face white with excitement.

"Kid, lemme ride Blazes! Tex Austin says I c'n ride in the grand entry if I c'n rustle a horse 'n saddle! Git me a saddle, Kid; I want t' ride with you! Tex gave me a badge so I could!"

"Heck, I don't know where there's a saddle, Boy. Why don't you go on back where the folks are?"

"Aw there's a drunk man back there layin' in the hay an' his saddle's right there by 'im an' he's dead to the world! I c'n take his saddle. A man said I could!"

"Well, my horses have got to run the relay race right after the parade, almost. Sorry, Boy, but I'm going to ride Blazes, and Sunup

and Stardust have got to rest while they have a chance. I — you can ride in my place, if you like," Kid offered, mechanically, his whole consciousness swept suddenly away from the argument to center itself with startled attention upon a group of riders bearing down upon them from the far end of the stables.

Like phantoms conjured by his homesick memories, the Happy Family came riding up; Stetsoned, chapped and spurred, the same old boys who had been the gods of his childhood. Rangemen from hatcrown to stirrup, holding the reins jauntily just as they used to do; the same easy grace in the saddle, the same careless tilt to their hats; Weary's long legs thrusting the stirrups a little forward; the Native Son lounging a bit to one side so that his left toe dangled loose in the stirrup bow; Pink with his gloved hands clasped upon the saddle horn; Andy Green's right shoulder drooping forward while his hand rested on his thigh.

The Kid's lips, his whole face felt stiffened and bloodless while he stared. His throat tightened. The Happy Family — heartbreakingly unchanged, amazingly younger in

the saddle than they had been when last he had seen them lounging on the porch of the Flying U in correct Hollywood attire, reliving like old men the days that were gone. And yet—

In their eyes he read the bitter truth. Phantoms from out the past they must be, as far as he was concerned, for as their eyes met his they held no glow of pleasure in the meeting. In a blinding flash of realization he knew that although they were the Happy Family to him, in their eyes he could never again be the Kid they had petted and teased and spoiled, returning his worship in full measure all the while. To them he was just a swell-headed college boob who thought he knew it all; an unmitigated fool who had betrayed all the laws of hospitality and then left home because his father had very naturally resented his attitude toward them. In their constraint, in their conscious effort to greet him as if nothing had ever happened to mar their friendship, he read dislike and cold disapproval of him and all his ways.

"Why, hello, Kid," Weary called out with an attempt at his old cheery tone. "Where'd you drop down from?"

"Hello," replied the Kid, and felt that his voice croaked the word.

"Going to top the salty ones?" The Native Son asked that, his languid drawl perverted to a sneer in that strange frozen mood of the Kid's.

"Maybe." The Kid wanted to say more, wanted to be cordial, wanted to explain away the wall of misunderstanding between them. But the words wouldn't come, somehow.

"Your folks are here," Weary added in a diffident aside, not wanting to seem reproachful.

"I know it." To save his life the Kid could not say more than that. It was as if invisible hands gripped his throat.

Weary looked at him, and it may be that he read a little of the misery in the Kid's eyes, half hidden though they were by the heavy lashes that gave the irises a smoky dark tinge. He sighed and leaned toward the Kid. "Wish you all the luck in the world, Kid," he said gently as they rode on. It seemed to the Kid, standing there watching them go, as if Pink and Andy Green avoided meeting his glance as they went by.

"Aw, it won't hurt Sunup a darn bit just to

walk around the track!" pleaded Boy, plucking at the blue satin sleeve to call the Kid's thoughts back to him.

The Kid started, exhaled a long, quivering breath and stared down at Boy with clouded, unseeing eyes.

"Hurry up, Kid! A man said I could take that saddle over there if I'd put it right back — come on! They'll be starting in a minute!"

Like a man in a trance the Kid got the saddle and bridle from beside the sleeping cowboy, saddled Sunup and stood at his head while Boy scrambled up. His Laramie boys had hurried off to get their own horses, and as they came riding single file down to where he was, the Kid mounted Blazes and swung in beside Walt Myers, letting Boy go on alone, which was not wise since the horse Boy rode was one of the precious relay string. Beck Wilson and Billy Perry came along behind, almost as excited as Boy, but mannishly hiding it under an air of elaborate unconcern.

Out in the hazy sunlight the Kid blinked at the spectacle before him on the gentle slope before the white façade of the museum. When last he had seen that slope it had been empty, a wide expanse of lawn with the roadway

running down at the side like a binding on a green velvet robe. Two hundred horsemen stood there now in double column, with more galloping alongside, anxious to find their places in the lines. Flag-draped automobiles, Indians in gay beaded costumes and war bonnets of eagle feathers. Two great flags fluttered at the head of the column down by the gate; and beyond them lay the huge coliseum with its steep slopes of massed humans and the distant droning as if all the bees in the world had gathered buzzing there.

The rodeo at last! No more was that vast horseshoe of masonry a silent place of mystery and gloom. It flowered with faces just as he had visioned it, and though he could not see them he became suddenly conscious of thousands of eyes all turned toward this gay, restless throng upon the slope. His face paled a little; his eyes darkened with excitement.

"Say, this is the real thing, Boy!" cried Walt, standing in his stirrups the better to gaze upon the long line of horsemen behind him.

The Kid nodded, soothing Blazes with little caressing pats on his sleek shoulder. Just

ahead of him Sunup was tossing his head, beginning to dance a little, eager to go. Boy turned his round red face and grinned at Kid, who smiled back at him with his lips while his heart sagged heavy with emotions he could never put in words. Everything jumbled together; the Happy Family up there near the head of the procession, and he not with them; his dad, his mother, somewhere there in that wall of faces; good old J. G., game to the last, coming all the way to Chicago to see him ride, and never telling why; had he brought the wheel chair? Dulcie Harlan frankly hoping to see him make a fool of himself. Like a motion picture running so fast upon the screen that all the scenes are blurred, the Kid's thoughts raced from one to the other—to rest, oddly enough, upon the mystery of that blue satin shirt—Suddenly the loud blare of a band, amplified until it seemed to the Kid that they were playing close beside him, swung into the heady rhythm of "The Stars and Stripes Forever." The column began to move forward, the horses taking little nipping steps as if they too felt the exhilaration of that martial music. As they swept down the slope and into the

arena waves of applause surged up to meet them.

Somewhere a man's sonorous voice announced the names of the celebrities as they passed the grand stand. "Luis Mendoza, the famous Western movie star!" — That was the Native Son. The Kid was too far back to see, but the roar of applause told its own story of the crowd's welcome. The Mayor; authors whose books of the West the Kid had devoured for the glamor that was in them. A glow of pride began to ease that heavy ache in his chest. He lifted his eyes to the wall of faces, scanned them as he rode by, caught a little of the friendliness in their smiles.

"Oh, look at those four cowboys dressed just alike! The ones in the blue shirts! Aren't they — "

The Kid flushed and looked straight ahead, straining his ears to get the rest of it as he went on, and couldn't because of the noise. The announcer, too, kept speaking of this one and that one, the music waiting upon his words, then taking up the lively strains where it had left off.

On around the horseshoe, straight across the arena to form in lines four deep while

the special introductions of the leaders were made. The Kid found himself in the second row, directly behind Andy Green, the other boys standing farther along. They did not see him, and he was glad of that, for their nearness brought again a thrust of homesickness for the friendships he had lost. He tried not to think of it; tried to fix his attention upon the crowd; tried to interest himself in the other riders — in the garishly costumed Indians on their painted ponies. But the ache was there again, do what he would to ignore it.

The formalities were over at last. The ranks broke, the riders spurred forward down the long oval field, yip-yipping as they went. With them galloped the Kid, but in the midst of the tumult he did not open his lips, though no one noticed that but Boy, who worshiped him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"YOU'D MAKE A DOCTOR OF HIM?"

"SAY, you ain't mad at me, are yuh, Kid, 'cause I wanted to ride Sunup?" Boy had slipped out of the borrowed saddle and was trying to loosen a new kind of cinch fastening.

"Heck, no. I've got a lot of work ahead, and I guess I'm absent-minded." Kid turned as Billy Perry and Beck Wilson came hurrying up. "Say, boys, keep an eye out for one of my shirts, will you? Some guy stole one out of my suitcase. Boy, you've got a badge so you can go where you please — you might run on to him. If you do, come and tell me. Hustle over to the chutes now, boys — the bareback riding is next, and you're disqualified if you aren't there when they call your name. And then come back for the relay race."

They disappeared at a trot, but Boy still lingered.

"I wish I was big enough to be in your team, Kid. What you goin' to do first, Kid?"

"You've got a program. You prowl around and try and locate that shirt of mine. And you might tell Mother hello for me — J. G. too." The Kid was smoothing the saddle blanket on Stardust's back and did not look up as he spoke. "I'm going to trick rope now — you get back up there and root for me. I'll need it."

"Well, keep up your nerve, Kid. You'll be all right if you don't git scared," Boy encouraged gravely as he left him.

The Kid selected the ropes he would need for the fancy roping event which followed next, mounted and rode out into the arena where the last bareback rider was just picking himself up in front of the chutes, while the multitude cheered derisively and rocked with laughter. From the crowd's point of view, that had evidently been a comedy fall, though the rider probably found nothing very funny in it. The Kid looked to see if his shirt was blue — which it was not — and breathed freer. But he wanted to know how his boys had come out, and rode on down to the chutes where he caught a glimpse of Walt.

They had fared pretty well, Walt told him pantingly. They thought Beck at least was in

the day money, but Bill's horse hadn't turned it on the way he should have done, and Walt's mount had decided to lie down and sulk.

"But Beck had a salty one, and he made a good ride, Kid. We ought to get eating money out of that, anyway."

"Well, if you don't, I'll get in the money on the relay, Walt, I'm going to ride Sunup today, and use him for the calf roping too. So see that he gets a good rubdown, will you, if I'm too busy? I'll be busy resting up for the calf roping," he grinned. "Most of my events follow each other thick and fast, it happens. Stardust I trick ride on, but that's the tenth event, so — "

"Fancy ropers get ready!" cried a horseman riding by. "Montana Kid, your place is over there at the grand stand."

"Say, that's the spotlight for you," crowed Walt. "Well, do your stuff, Kid. Sorry I can't watch."

Billy and Beck came running up to give him a cheering word before they disappeared into the gloom of the long passage. The clear, stentorian voice of the announcer began blazoning the names of the trick ropers, and Kid

braced himself, took a long breath and rode out into full view of the throng, feeling as if he were taking a high dive into an icy pool. Others were flocking out with him, however, which made him a shade less conspicuous; and close beside him, evidently assigned to a near-by station, rode a little slim girl in blue satin blouse and knickers no more than two shades darker than the color he wore. Just in time to rescue him from a bad case of stage fright, the Kid's attention was caught and held by the girl, who looked at him shyly with a quick sidelong glance and bit her lip, checking a smile which the Kid felt was friendly as well as forlorn.

"You as scared as I am?" her voice shook noticeably.

"More," grinned the Kid. "Cheer up — I guess they won't shoot us."

The slight contact steadied him, but it also brought vividly to mind the fact that Dulcie Harlan was probably sitting in one of the boxes and would be watching him derisively; and that his mother and dad were up there somewhere, and his uncle J. G. He did not look at the crowd. He did not dare. But he did glance at the slim little blue figure dis-

mounting already to do her first simple loop-spinning. Over the back of her horse she gave him a wistful look, as if she hated to see him go on and leave there before that solid bank of staring humanity. But the band was already playing for the act — no time now for sympathy; and anyway, she'd get over it, same as he expected to.

But a fellow couldn't help thinking, even while he whirled the rope loop in a dizzying circle up and down, himself in the middle of it. (Funny she'd choose blue for her color.) Right hand, left hand, right leg over, left leg over. (That darned Harlan girl would maybe call this cruel too, keeping Stardust out there in the sun!) Rope spinning over his head and a sudden leap to Stardust's rump and from there to the saddle. (Terrible, that was — jumping right up on a horse's back!) Loping up and down, the loop widened now and lowered so Stardust could hop through it. (Wonder how the little girl's making out; no time to look, though.) Two ropes now, one spinning at the side, one over the horse's head so that Stardust looked gravely out through it. (They'd always liked that trick in Laramie.) Off again without losing either loop, and wid-

ening both a little so that he could jump in and out of each one alternately. (A darned hard stunt, that one; wonder if the Happy Family ever tried that!) On his head, both loops going still. (With that music, a fellow could almost do a clog.) Dancing up and down the track, first in one loop while the other whirled high around his shoulders, then reversing them. (That's for the boys, darn 'em — only they'd say ropes are different nowadays!) Only one loop now, whirling as he rode, and Stardust jumping through it like a cat. (Was all that clapping for him, or for some one else? Couldn't look up to see. Wonder what the folks thought about it. Bet Dad couldn't do this.)

On and on, one trick after the other, sweat running down his face while he worked. No daily prizes in this event, but eight hundred dollars if he won first money at the finals. Stardust playing his part now, galloping up and down riderless and with the reins knotted over the saddle horn, that uncanny loop finding him always, no matter what difficult position the Kid might be in when the horse went past. The Kid saved that little stunt for the last, chiefly because it brought Stardust in for

his share of whatever applause the act won from the crowd.

No use going back to the stables now, for already the horses were being led out for the relay race. Hot and tired, the Kid took off his big hat and hung it on a post, wiped his face and adjusted the knot in his reins before he tightened the cinch and mounted. Here came the Laramie boys eagerly through the gate, Sunup following gingerly, his eyes going this way and that, watching the hurrying men. With the other riders the Kid drew lots for his station and beckoned Walt and Billy to Number Six.

"Fine for a starter," Walt exulted. "You won't have all the crazy ones bumping into you down here. How'd the roping go, Kid?"

"Too busy to see. Billy, you flag me, will you? Walt can hold Sunup. Don't grab his nose, Walt — he'll fight it if you do. I'd start with him, only Stardust's quieter in the line-up. If he crowds up on you, Walt, just rub his cheek and talk to him a little and he'll stand, all right. Stardust's human. You won't have any trouble with him. Well — wish me luck, boys!"

He rode out to the starting line and dis-

covered there that all riders must wear cowboy hats; a senseless ruling, it seemed to him, as he rode back. He had lifted his hat from the post and was settling it firmly on his head when a voice directly above him gave a jeering laugh.

"Cowboy sheik — 's afraid he'll spoil that lovely marcel! Whyn't yuh wear a net?"

The Kid turned and glared toward the speaker, but straightway forgot the jibe. Just above him in one of the official boxes sat his father and mother, the Old Man and most of the Happy Family. As his startled gaze swept them swiftly it fell upon Dulcie Harlan, sitting with the Native Son in the front row of chairs. She gave him a supercilious little smile — at least he interpreted it so — and said something to her companion which brought the slow smile the Kid remembered so well. He waited for no more. With a vicious yank at his hat he rode furiously away, feeling like a bug under a microscope.

How in the world had that darned Harlan girl managed to hook up with his folks? What was it she said about him? Old J. G. was looking fine — he supposed his mother thought he had disgraced the whole family now for

sure. Dad sure gave him a stony look — straight at him and never batted an eye! Oh, well, if that was the way they all felt about him!

The announcer's voice booming out of the amplifiers recalled the Kid to the urgency of the moment. More than ever he knew that he had to win this race. Something more than square meals for his boys and himself was at stake now, though that was urgent too. He simply couldn't make a flop of it now, before that bunch. They were sitting up there expecting it — he could feel their scornful expectation that he would come in tailing the field. Well, he was going to win. He *had* to win!

Horses danced back and forth across the line, thoroughbreds some of them, keyed up and quivering. Well, Stardust might not be thoroughbred, but he had good blood, and what was more, he had sense. The Kid turned him, backed him across the line and leaned and patted his neck, and the horse sent one knowing look back at his master and stood still. Keyed to go, though. The Kid could feel the beat of his heart, feel the tensed muscles.

A false start, which the Kid foresaw and declined to join. Stardust wasn't so sure,

though. He was pulling at the bit, shaking his head impatiently. The Kid's hand reassured him and he quieted again. Then, his glance up and down the line warning him, he set his feet just so in the stirrups and felt an answering tremor of the horse as the whistle blew a shrill signal to go.

They got away smoothly, Stardust leaping into his full stride with the third jump, as was his way of running. In the first furlong he passed a brown and a gray and was creeping up on a lean-flanked black that was streaking it in long leaps like a greyhound. The Kid had studied that black in its stall, a little uneasy, a shade doubtful. It had the look of speed, but he selfishly prayed that it would blow up at the station, too nervous for a quick change. Certainly it was a horse to fear on the track.

Coming into the last turn down by the Indian camp the black's rider began using the whip, and the horse lengthened its stride and crept ahead a length. But Stardust laid back his ears and took the home stretch in a burst of speed that brought him nearly even when the black horse was being pulled in for the change at station Number Two. Just as the

Kid had hoped, the black overran and had to be brought back — a circumstance that won a grin from the Kid's tightened lips.

Stardust surged up past five stations to where Bill stood out on the track waving his arms to point the Kid in, and the wise little sorrel turned and stopped with a stiff-legged jump as if he had used four-wheel brakes. In that jump the Kid was off and pulling the saddle, swinging it into place on Sunup's back. Another swift motion caught the cinch and tightened it, and he was on and gone from there as a little pinto streaked by. Others came tearing up behind him. The Kid leaned low and implored the horse to show his stuff, while the thunder of hoofbeats filled his ears and he rode in a smother of dust from the first lap they had run.

On that last sharp turn the pinto shortened his stride. But Sunup leaned to the curve and took it full speed, like the trained rope-horse he was, that could follow at the heels of a dodging animal and never slacken his pace. He shot by the pinto just as it was yanked back on its heels at the station.

Stardust, watching for him to turn in, was trembling like an aspen leaf with eagerness

to go again. The Kid was on the ground with his saddle when Sunup stopped. He was on Stardust and gone two long jumps ahead of the black. He needed that extra space; every inch of it. He was leading the field, but inexorably the black horse was lessening the distance between them. He was taller than Stardust, longer, and his full stride covered more ground. The crowd was yelling for some one to "Go on! Go on!" The Kid thought they were beseeching the black horse, and his jaw set to the stubborn angle his parents would have recognized instantly — or the Happy Family, for that matter; they had seen him wear it upon occasion, years ago when he was being a "re'l ole cow-puncher" and wanted to do whatever his heroes did.

"Git outa here!" he hissed close to Stardust's flattened ears. "Want 'em to walk on yuh? *Move!"*

Stardust moved, but the tall black inched up until they were running neck and neck on the home stretch and the black was pulled down for his station.

This time the Kid landed running alongside Stardust, his fingers at the cinch. That gave him a second or so. He flung the saddle

on Sunup, gave one yank at the latigo because that was the rule, that saddles must be cinched, and yelled to the horse. Sunup was running when the Kid leaped to the saddle and leaned low. He could hear the pinto coming close behind. That darned pinto! Stuck like a guilty conscience. What was the crowd hollering about? Did they think he was going to be a flop? The pinto and the black — he'd show 'em both! He'd show the folks!

"And you thought you'd make a doctor out of that Kid!" Weary turned whimsically to the Little Doctor who was relaxing into her seat as the Kid rode through the gate close by — winner by an inch or so of Sunup's nose.

"That boy shore can ride!" Andy Green paid tribute as he relighted a forgotten cigarette.

"That dog-gone committee's went and let 'em run in a racehorse on the Kid!" the Old Man heatedly accused. "That black horse's got no business in a cowboy relay race. Somebuddy oughta tell 'em about it."

"I notice Claude held his own," the Little Doctor pointed out crisply. "He's looking thin. I wonder — "

"Now, Dell, for the Lord's sake don't get

weak-kneed and go honeying him up again," Chip warned her, so sternly that one suspected he was bolstering his own resolution.

"I'm not. I want Claude to get a thorough lesson, since it has come to a crisis between his parents and himself. But he *does* look thin. That doesn't mean I'm going to encourage him in this crazy idea of being a champion. I might have suspected it was in his mind." She bit her lip. "I do hope he isn't going to try and ride any bucking horses! If he does — "

"Why, Mrs. Bennett! Do you mean — is Montana Kid your son?" Miss Dulcie Harlan's eyes were extremely bright and wide open. She had been looking from one to the other, puzzled until the truth dawned suddenly.

"Montana Kid — what a name to call himself! Yes, he's our son Claude, behaving like a wild colt that has broken out of the pasture. I'd like to shake him!" She laughed unevenly and wiped her eyes as unobtrusively as was possible in so public a place. "To think my own son would look me squarely in the eye and never give a sign!"

"Let him alone awhile and he'll come around," Chip counselled. "Young cub—he'll come around fast enough when he runs out of money!" Which was of course a normal father's conventional reaction. "Or when he finds we aren't worrying a darned bit over his speaking to us," he amended more keenly. "He's too satisfied with himself right now, Dell. He'd only patronize us."

"I was hoping he'd be beaten," she told him half-heartedly. "He's altogether too sure of himself."

"They ain't goin 'to beat *him,*" her brother stated with grim boastfulness; "not if they pull that race horse outa there like they oughta. The Kid knows what he's doin'. Perty level-headed, for all the chance he's had. He can handle a horse!"

So they talked, while the cowgirls rode bronks unheeded. To the party occupying the north end of the official's box just south of the gate into the arena, the rodeo had resolved itself chiefly into the presence and the performance of one slim young fellow who never glanced their way if he could help it.

The Little Doctor relapsed unconsciously

into a maternal solicitude that concerned itself with little things.

"I wonder where he got that peacock-blue shirt," she said. "I never saw it before — and he's too dark for that shade of blue."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE KID GOES AFTER HIS SHIRT

OUT in the field, midway between the chutes and the Indian camp, the flagman on the big sturdy bay dropped the white flag as the Kid flung both hands aloft, stepping back away from the huddled black calf on the ground. A pause, and the booming voice of the announcer:

"Mon-tana Kid-d — t-i-m-e — twen-ty-n-i-n-e and four-fifths *sec*-onds!"

Not so good. The perfunctory applause that followed told how the crowd had failed to thrill over the Kid's calf roping. It ought to have been better; it would have been, if the Kid had not missed his first throw. Those black calves were quicker to duck aside than the tame bull calves the Kid had been practising on at home, and this one fooled the Kid. He untied the little beast, all but yielding to the impulse he had to lift it on the toe of his boot for the trick it had played him,

and rode scowling back to the chutes. No day money for him on this event; already his time had been beaten by a lanky man from Oklahoma. The Happy Family were crowing themselves hoarse over the bloomer he pulled, he thought savagely, and tied Sunup to the fence for Walt to ride back if he wanted to. The Kid went over and stood beside Billy and Beck, who were not contesting this event, and tormented himself with imagining what that bunch over in the box was thinking. It's rather a pity that the Kid could not have overheard a few of the remarks.

"Fast work, that — considering he blew his first loop," was Weary's comment. "Prettiest throw and tie I've seen, so far."

Chip, beside him, gave a nod and a snort.

"Darned chump! If he'd told me what he was up to I could have put him wise to the fact that those bulls are slower than contest calves," he grumbled. "What he should have done was give them a longer start. But that's it — you can't tell a young rooster like him anything!"

"Wonderful horse he's got," the Native Son observed. "I wonder if he'd let me use it in a few roping scenes to-morrow morning.

He'd photograph like a million. And that other one, the little sorrel — "

"Stardust, he calls the sorrel," Chip supplied wistfully. "Trained them himself, as near as I can find out — "

The Little Doctor gave a sudden exclamation, pointing to a certain name on her program.

"He's going to ride bronks!" she cried tragically. "Chip, can't you go to the judges and forbid him to ride? Why, he isn't of age! He can't ride without your consent, can he?"

"I guess he can," Chip told her dryly. "I sure am not going to try and halterbreak him now, at this late day. Let him ride if he wants to — he won't be the first young gander to get piled. Do him good. Knock a little sense into him, maybe."

"Oh, I want to see him ride a bronk!" Miss Dulcie Harlan eagerly exclaimed. "I'm sorry you don't want him to, Mrs. Bennett — and I'm afraid you must blame me, really. He hadn't entered for bronk riding, but I got him to do it. He's really riding for my sake, sort of — "

"Why, when did you meet Claude? I didn't know — "

"Oh, ages ago," said Miss Dulcie sweetly — as her name implied. "I think your son is the best-looking thing, Mrs. Bennett! I'm crazy about him, really. But when Dad told me he knew your brother long ago, and asked if I might stay with you, I never dreamed Montana Kid was your son that had run away from home. He'll be simply paralyzed when he discovers — well, I think he must suspect something already, for he looked straight at me, here with you, and he had the funniest expression on his face! I'm simply dying to see him ride a bucking horse; I bet him he'd fall off. I do hope he does!"

"Well, I don't," his mother retorted, rather too sharply for perfect politeness. "A bucking horse nearly killed his father, and I saw the whole thing. I shall never get over the horror of it, I think. If Claude should be thrown and hurt — "

"Say, he plays football, and that's a darn sight more dangerous," Chip broke in upon her worrying. "I wish I had a dollar for every time I've been thrown off a horse!" His eyes went to Weary and Andy Green.

"Same here," Andy spoke up promptly.

"Why, getting piled is part of a kid's education. Why — "

"Dog-gone it, the Kid ain't piled, yet!" The Old Man glared around at them. "No use hollerin' before you're hurt, Dell. He ain't piled, and he ain't goin' to be piled, neither!"

So the squaw race went lurching past before their inattentive eyes while they argued and discussed the Kid, whose chagrin magnified his failure to make good and sent him into the bronk riding in the mood to do or die.

Billy Perry and Walt Myers rode first, and caused a flutter of excitement in the box because of the blue shirts they wore.

"There he goes!" squealed Dulcie, regardless of the announcer's statement that Walter Myers was riding Dun Gone out of chute Number Five.

"That's not the Kid," the Native Son corrected her. "Too stocky for him."

Two other riders hurtled from the chutes with more or less skill and courage, and then another blue shirt of a certain unusual shade; but it clothed Billy Perry's wiry little torso and drew upon that innocent youth the scathing sarcasm of Miss Harlan.

"Blue is being worn this season," she opined, and got a worried little smile from her chaperon.

"I don't mind it — on other young men," she said whimsically. "But I do object to blue satin on my son!"

"He must look darling in a dinner jacket," mused Dulcie irrelevantly, dreaming aloud, it may be.

"Mon-tana *Kid!* Riding *In*valid — outa chute Number *Four!*"

Abrupt silence in the box, while their gaze fixed intently upon chute Number Four. Through the stout bars of the gate a heaving brown body could be glimpsed. A dull wooden clatter, a dark head thrust suddenly up above the top bar. More clatter.

"Oh, don't *let* Claude ride that outlaw!" the Little Doctor cried under her breath to Chip.

"By golly, that Invalid is working off all his steam before he starts!" Weary exclaimed in a purposely exuberant tone. "Bet he won't more than crow-hop when they let him out."

"There he goes, climbing up now to get on!" cried Dulcie, wriggling in her chair with anticipatory excitement, as the Kid

climbed the gate and sat astride the top, waiting a chance to lower himself into the saddle. If she could only have read the Kid's thoughts just then!

"Mon-tana *Kid,* folks — chute Number *Four,*" the amplifiers admonished.

The Little Doctor's hands clenched together in her lap as the blue satin shirt slowly disappeared within the chute. She could see it now between the bars — the Kid setting his weight carefully in the saddle, fitting his feet to the stirrups. The Happy Family, knowing of old just what was taking place in those few preparatory seconds, leaned forward in strained silence.

In the chute the Kid settled himself, picked up the one rein in his left hand — purposely leaving it loose — pulled off his hat and held it aloft in his right hand and grinned through at the gate tender.

"Let 'er go!"

The gate was yanked open. For a taut second horse and rider stood framed within the narrow pen, then with a squeal of rage and a high forward leap, Invalid dashed into the open. The Kid reached forward with his wrapped spur rowels, high on the shoulders

with a backward swing. One, two, three, four, five — "scratching front five times," according to the contest rule. (Gosh, but this Invalid horse was certainly throwing his feet!) Backward with the spurs — one, two, three, four, five — and that also was the rule. (Wonder what would happen if a horse didn't jump that many times?) Swing your hat and yip-yip-yip (Beginning to get good! And that coyote yell for the Harlan girl's especial benefit, darn her picture. Wanted to see him take a spill, did she? Well, it was just too bad, that was all; but he couldn't seem to pour himself out of the saddle very well to-day!) Invalid wheeled upon his hind feet, gathered himself together and came down with all the force his twelve-hundred pounds could put into the landing. (Ah-ha, so that was the game, eh? Bet there was another one.) There was, and the Kid felt as if his neck had shortened four inches after that jolt. Then the whistle blew and the assistants galloped up on either side, one taking the halter rein from the Kid's willing hand while the other rode close, so that the Kid could hop off.

"That Kid's a born rider, Chip!" Weary declaimed. "I told you he had the look of a

rider, didn't I? And you'd make a doctor outa *him,* would you? Oh, Mamma!"

"He oughta be in pictures," Andy declared, with a shade of reluctance.

"Yeah — his head is almost big enough for a star, right now!" Pink reminded him bluntly. "It'd just take one picture to ruin that boy for life!"

"Oh, didn't that horse buck just *darling?"* Dulcie enthused. "Of course, Montana Kid will have to fall off *sometime* — if he doesn't, I'll never be able to face him again. You're right, Mr. Perkins; he's terrifically lofty."

"I don't want you boys to encourage Claude in this sort of thing," the Little Doctor here cautioned the group earnestly. "I simply won't have him losing his head over Wild West contests. He can't keep it up without getting hurt or crippled, and it's a shame to waste that splendid strength of his on bucking horses."

"Too late now — you've got to let him go ahead and get a spill or two, Dell," Chip contended. By the light in his eyes Chip was betraying a definite pride in his recalcitrant son and heir; and by his tone he was merely letting an unruly child discover for himself that

fire will burn. But tones, as we all know, can be controlled. Eyes seldom lie.

The Kid felt better after what he hoped was a hundred-point ride. Walt and Billy had made good rides too, and some one in the team was almost sure to draw a day prize into the treasury — where it certainly would be welcome. As he rode back to the stables to change mounts for the fancy riding event, his hat was set at a jaunty angle over one handsome eyebrow and his whole being exhaled an aura of conscious excellence. He could even fling a glance upward to Dulcie Harlan, and an airy wave of the hand to his mother and dad and Uncle J. G. as he eased through the gate which some one obligingly opened.

Later, when he reappeared with Stardust for the trick and fancy riding, the little girl in the blue satin knickers and blouse was riding to the gate; slowly, because of the crowd gathered there and because, too, she was a little timid about riding out alone into the arena. As the Kid came up, she sent him the same wistful little smile that had made him want to cheer her somehow before the trick roping began. Still, it was not altogether the smile that brought the Kid boldly to her side.

Partly it was his consciousness of Dulcie Harlan there in the box just behind him.

"Going to ride?"

"Yes; are you?"

"Going to try," he said lightly, and pushed the gate open for her to pass, following her as the loitering men made way for them. "We better be getting over that way, I guess."

"Oh, no. They told me to ride down to the other end of the arena and be ready to come dashing up this way when we're called," she told him shyly. "I came out here so I wouldn't have to ride down through those dark stables alone."

The Kid nodded, and they rode together down the track. He hoped that Harlan girl was getting an eyeful; and he was glad this little girl had chosen to wear blue. If she made good, he thought, he might invite her to join their team. Two or three good girl riders might be just the touch they needed to make a team popular.

With that nebulous idea in the back of his mind, the Kid watched her when she rode alone up the center of the arena, doing her special stunts. Cute little rider, all right. Needed some coaching on that crawl around

under the horse's neck; too risky, the way she did it, and not so showy as a safer way he knew.

A fine lot of riders, take them all through, the little girl in blue giving promise of being one of the best, with a bit more confidence and another stunt or two. Light as thistle seed, she was. Kind of lonesome; didn't seem to know a soul. None of the other girls seemed to know her — or to want to, either. In the intervals between the Kid's own breakneck rides up the middle of the arena, he watched the girl. One or two of the boys ventured to speak to her, but so far as the Kid could see they got scant encouragement; and that did not displease him much.

But after all, he did not ride back with her, for the event closed with a wild dash down the arena, which brought them to the neighborhood of the lower stable entrance. Stardust had done enough for one day, and he needed a rubdown. The Kid therefore rode in and unsaddled the horse and rubbed him dry before starting back afoot to the chutes to see how the boys were making out with the steer riding. All three had entered for that and the wild-horse race which closed the program

just after the Indian buck race. The Kid's work was over until evening, and take it all in a lump, he felt fairly well satisfied with the day. He was walking along down the passage behind the horses and taking his time for it when Boy came running down to find him.

"Kid! You said — you said somebuddy stole one of your shirts, and I seen a man a little while ago, and he was wearin' your blue shirt! And somebuddy stole that drunk man's chaps and hat too, while he was asleep. I was in here before, but you was gone. And the drunk was sure cussin' a blue streak! I know it wasn't any of your team — "

"Where was it you saw him?" The Kid's face hardened as he quickened his pace. "How long ago, Boy?"

"Not very long. It was when you was out there trick riding. I was comin' along from the men's room this side the telephone place, and this guy come along with white hairy chaps on and your shirt. And I watched him, and he went in, and I come to get you and you was gone. So I went back, but I didn't see him any place, and then I come to git you ag'in. Kid, he's sure got nerve wearin' your shirt!"

"I'll say he's got nerve!" The Kid took such long steps that Boy had to trot to keep abreast as they went up the incline and into the outer corridor, empty now of all save a few scattered concession stands doing no business, the keepers busy setting their booths to rights after the rush. Even the ticket boxes outside were empty and closed, the gatekeepers sitting idle. From above them came the muffled buzzing of the crowd, bursts of laughter and cheering now and then punctuating the hum. The Kid looked in the dressing room, found it empty and turned to Boy.

"I'm going to the chutes, and you aren't allowed. Go back to the folks — they'll have a fit if you aren't there when this crowd begins to move."

He struck off, hurrying now to see the boys ride steers. But just as he passed the curve in the wall he glimpsed, far down the corridor ahead of him, a tall man wearing a blue satin shirt of a shade there was no mistaking.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ROBBERY

HARLAN went through the outer office, where a few cowboys were putting away chaps and spurs in their lockers, eager to get out ahead of the crowd for a visit to the city. At the door of the inner business office he met Blair standing before the closed door, and to him Blair turned with some surprise.

"Why, hello, Harlan! I thought you were having some secret conflab inside; going to get away with the gate money, maybe. The door's locked — "

"Locked?" Harlan tried it himself. "Who's in there?"

"Don't know — Smith, maybe; oughta have the money checked up by this time — the wagon's waiting for it."

"No reason why he should lock the door." Harlan knocked sharply with the cane he carried. As one of the most important members of the rodeo committee, he did not fancy

being locked out of the office where the money was kept. He was knocking again when Tex strolled up, a fat brown cigar in the corner of his humorous mouth and his hat on the back of his head. It had been a good show. The crowd was twice what he had expected and its enthusiasm was a heartening music in the ears of the manager.

"Say, Harlan," he drawled, "what's the matter? Boys actin' up on yuh? What yuh locked out for?"

"Something wrong in there," snapped Harlan, his face no longer smiling and boyish. "Smith must be checking up, but that's no reason why the door should be locked."

"Where's Barney? Ain't he supposed to hang around, keeping cases till the money's out?"

"I saw Barney going over toward the chutes a few minutes ago," said Blair.

Harlan was knocking again, a peremptory tattoo. A curious group was forming behind him. Tex suddenly tapped him on the shoulder.

"Say, I'll bust the damn door in, if yo'all will stand aside a minute," he offered, and as Harlan stepped back Tex leaned his shoulder

against the door. "I could shoot the lock," he said, "but that might draw a crowd in here."

His strength was prodigious. The third heave did the work and he staggered in, Harlan and Blair following close at his heels. The two stopped in amazement at the scene before them, but Tex took a long step into the room and yanked the gag from over Smith's mouth.

"Give us the dope while I unwind yuh," he said tersely. "Who did it, and how?"

Smith, trussed to his chair, worked his jaws silently until speech returned. Blood was still oozing slowly from a broken bruise on the side of his head, and he seemed dazed.

"Ask Jennie," he mumbled. "She saw more 'n I did." He nodded towards the bound figure of the stenographer.

"Keep that bunch outa here," Tex commanded, tilting his head towards the doorway where the cowboys were crowding in. Blair turned to do his bidding. "Tell 'em to keep their mouths shut, and send an officer in here. Get McNarty. Boys," he raised his voice so that they could hear, "the first feller that yeeps quits the contest, I don't give a damn

who he is. McNarty's out by the gate — send him in. Tell him I want him, but don't say why." The group by the door melted, and he turned to where Harlan was freeing the secretary from the bandanna gag.

"A cowboy put his head in the door and told Barney he was to go over to the north gate," the girl explained nervously. "Mr. Smith was working then on the accounts. The fellow had a badge and looked all right. Barney went, and in a minute or two I saw this same man come out of that closet behind the door. He had a gun. He pushed the door shut with his foot and locked it. Then he came over here — he pulled another gun after he locked the door — and he struck Mr. Smith on the head with it. He kept the other gun pointed at me.

"Mr. Smith crumpled down and the man gagged me before I realized — he tied my hands behind the chair, and then he gagged and tied Mr. Smith. He was very quick, but he wasn't nervous. Then he gathered up all the paper money — I had just finished making it up in packages — there was an awful lot — a whole armful stacked up. He carried it into the closet and came back and got a bag

of silver dollars. He took that into the closet."

"Into the *closet?*" cried Harlan and Tex together, and turned to investigate the place just as McNarty came hurrying in.

Tex, first inside the narrow place, stooped and stared through a square hole cut through the wall, down near the floor.

"Well, I'll be damned," he murmured to himself, and wriggled through, Harlan crawling after him, regardless of the damage to his neat blue serge. In two minutes they were back. The secretary had just finished her very lucid repetition of the robbery.

"He went through the wall, into the dressing room," Harlan explained. "Must have had a suitcase or something hidden in there so he could carry the money away. How much did he get, Miss Gray?"

"Close to thirty thousand, Mr. Harlan. Of course there's that much more in silver, and here are several piles of paper money he didn't get. I laid this in the drawer out of the way, after Mr. Smith had checked it and found it O.K."

"Good girl. Now, tell us how he looks. Size, how he was dressed, and so on."

"Well, I think I've seen him around out-

side, Mr. Harlan. He's tall and very slender and he wore a blue satin shirt; a brilliant parrot blue, almost green. You can't mistake it. I have seen several of the boys wearing that color."

"I know the shirts you mean," Harlan said crisply. "Four of the contestants have them. Three are Wyoming boys and the fourth came from Montana — rode through on horseback and camped here in the stadium for a week or more. Nice, well-mannered chap — Montana Kid. Badge Number One. He's no stick-up man."

"Three of them blue-shirt boys are contesting right now," drawled Tex. "That lets them out, looks like. Montana Kid left the arena right after the fancy riding. I saw him heading for the stables on that sorrel of his." Without in the least realizing it, Tex was demonstrating his eagle-eyed knowledge of what went on in the arena. "There's your four blue shirts, and one of 'em could be in on this deal — far as time goes. I don't hardly believe he's that stripe, though."

McNarty, already at work on the case, cocked an eyebrow upward, his head bent to the telephone.

"Aw'ri' — send 'em to the office fast as yuh pick 'em up," he said, and hung up the receiver.

"Murphy's posting men at all the exits," he said. "No cowboy can leave the stadium till this thing's cleared up. Every man wearin' a blue shirt will be brought here for identification. If he didn't slip out already, we're pretty sure to get him. Hole in the wall, you say?" He went with Tex to look at the place.

Quiet as they tried to keep the affair, whispers went round that the office had been robbed, and by a cowboy at that. Beck, Billy and Walt were trailed from the arena after the wild-horse race and asked, as a matter of form only, to come and let Miss Gray look them over. Other blue shirts — but none of the right shade or anywhere near it — were brought before the secretary, who looked at them and shook her head.

"No, he was tall," she insisted. "His shirt was just like those three young men wore that you brought in first. But I'm sure it wasn't one of them."

"So am I," said Tex. "They must have been riding the steers just about when this was

pulled." He chewed his cigar thoughtfully. "You got a good look at his face, didn't you?"

"Why, no. When he looked in at the door his hat was tilted so his face was hidden, and anyway, I didn't pay much attention. When he came out of the closet he had his neckerchief — a black one — pulled up over his nose, just under his eyes. But I'd know him, I think, by his height and build."

That brought a peculiarly grim look to Harlan's face, because it had just been demonstrated to him that it would take some little time to dig through the wall and make as clean a job as had been done.

"You remember the young fellow I gave Number One badge to — the one we hunted through the box for?"

"Yes, Mr. Harlan," she said, her gaze lowered to the desk. Perhaps she remembered Harlan's boyish eagerness to find that badge for the First Cowboy.

"He's the fourth contestant who wears that shade of blue," he sad flatly. "It seems they have formed some sort of team — one of the boys explained it to us. It isn't a nice thing to think — but did you notice the number on the fellow's badge?"

"I — no, Mr. Harlan, I knew he had a badge on, and that's all."

"But his general build — "

"He was over six feet, I think, and slender." She bit her lip and her swift glance upward was troubled.

"Do you think — " Harlan cleared his throat " — could you say it was Montana Kid?"

"I — no, I'd have to see him again with just his eyes showing. I couldn't be sure — "

"Did it look like Montana Kid?" One knew now that Harlan was an attorney, pushing his witness slowly, inexorably toward a definite avowal. One knew it, too, by the way in which the group stood back and let him question her. "Was there a resemblance?"

"I — I'm afraid there was, Mr. Harlan; a resemblance."

"He had the run of the place," Norm reminded Harlan. "All the chance in the world to doctor that wall." He did not add that it was Harlan's fault that a strange cowboy was given the freedom of the stadium, but Harlan could not fail to read his tone.

"I don't believe he did it," snapped Harlan, "but we'll know in a few minutes. They'll

bring him in and let Miss Gray identify him if she can. He's around somewhere, I feel sure."

But after an hour had passed with no sign of the Kid, Harlan did not feel quite so sure. The police were still combing the stadium's seething underworld, the gatekeepers were turning back all the big hats and tanned faces, and blue shirts were rapidly being weeded out from the crowd. More police were coming in response to McNarty's call for help. The Kid, however, had vanished. Even Harlan's faith began to waver before that cold fact.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TRAIL OF THE SHIRT

WITHIN half an hour fifty plain-clothes men and uniformed policemen were quietly searching the stadium for Montana Kid. It was deemed best to keep the search as secret as possible and to suppress all news of the robbery for the present, but never in his life again would Kid be such a sought-after young man.

The Kid was very busy on his own account just then. He ducked through the gate thirty seconds behind his stolen blue shirt, past a gatekeeper who was afterwards proven color-blind, by the way — and saw his quarry lift a pair of white, hairy chaps into a yellow cab and follow them hurriedly. The car slid from the curb as the Kid waved down the next one. Cabs were swarming on that one-way street to catch the rodeo crowd as it poured out, and the Kid flung himself into the first that stopped and waved the driver on.

"That guy ahead there has got my shirt

on!" he announced heatedly. "Get 'im, Cabby! I'll have it off 'im and his hide with it!"

"Okay!"

The Kid sat forward on the seat and stared through the wind shield with squinting eyes that held the light of battle. In the cab ahead he caught glimpses of his blue satin shirt — no mistaking it for any other blue shirt. It was his. The fellow surely had gall, to steal a shirt and put it right on his back and wear it where the owner could see!

The fugitive must have sensed the need of hurry, for the cab he was in went speeding to the corner, swung north at a reckless clip and shot up past the eastern side of the stadium, weaving in and out among slower cars.

"Pay my fine if I get pinched for speeding?" the Kid's driver shot over his shoulder. "That guy's doing forty. Still want me to catch him?"

"Hell, yes!" snapped the Kid, in a tone that would have shocked his mother. "That's my blue shirt he's wearing! Stole it right out of my suitcase to-day —and he's got the nerve to wear it!"

"I'll git 'im, Cowboy!" And then, to show

how little he minded the speed he must keep. "How's the contest comin'? Awful big crowd — biggest since the Army and Navy game. Big as Lindbergh had, almost."

"He's turning the corner!" barked the Kid, ignoring the flattery. "Hit 'er up, can't you?"

"He's playin' right into our hand, Cowboy. Don't worry — I'll run 'im down 'fore he makes Michigan Avenue."

They took that corner with a lurch that reminded the Kid forcibly of Invalid as he grabbed for the robe rail.

"Making me pull leather," he grinned. "I guess you're doing all right, at that."

"Crawlin' up on him!" The driver honked blatantly at a shiny new limousine and shaved by with an inch to spare.

At the next corner they met the full press of southbound traffic, with two policemen stationed there to handle the crowd which would soon come pouring into town from the stadium. The fleeing cab halted perforce, and the Kid's cab pulled up alongside, the driver looking back grinning approval of himself. But the grin froze to a stare of amazement. The Kid was making a dive through the win-

dow and into the other cab — the door being locked by a device which cabbies use for reasons of their own.

The Kid landed headfirst and fighting the astonished thief, his legs writhing briefly upon the fender and running board. He had kicked himself inside, however, before two motor cops with shrieking sirens drew up alongside. (Where they had come from and how they had got there so soon will always be a deep mystery to the Kid.) While the car rocked on its springs and the driver ducked splinters of glass, the officers tried to make themselves heard or heeded. It was only when the Kid smelled a gun barrel directly under his nose that he subsided sufficiently to notice who was blocking the westering sunlight that had streamed in through the window. He jerked back his head, away from the gun, and blinked surprisedly at the policeman.

"Cut it out, here! What ya think ya're doin', fightin' like that?"

"He stole my shirt!" cried the Kid. "He can't pull anything like that — ah-h, yuh would, uh?" He lunged again and grappled with the thief, twisting a wrist until a knife dropped silently upon the chaps tumbled on

the floor. "That's the kind of a bird he is! Tried to knife me, and you looking on!" The Kid fell once more to beating the fellow's head against the hard window sill.

"Hey, quit it, now! Want me to lay you out with this gun?"

"Well, you want him to knife me, and you stand there and watch him do it?" The Kid's eyes blazed. "Two of you — and you don't do a damn thing to him!"

"I'll do a plenty to the both of you," promised the officer with the gun, winking across at his fellow, who was evidently acting merely as a guard to prevent any attempt at escape from that side. "Drive on to the station," he ordered the cab driver. "And you, in there, cut out that fighting, or I'll slap the irons on the both of you. Don't you know you'll get life, fightin' on the street like that?" The twinkle in his eyes somewhat belied the harshness of his voice, but the Kid was not looking at him just then.

"I know I'll get my shirt off him," he retorted stubbornly. "And I know he won't pull any knife on me in a hurry, either."

"Well, hold 'im, then — but don't yuh hit 'im again or I'll come in there to the both of

you! Drive on, you; you're jamming the traffic a mile back!"

Conveyed by two motor cops and the yellow cab that had lost its fare but whose driver might be useful as a witness, the Kid ultimately arrived at the police station intact, furious, but savagely victorious, with his stolen shirt within his grasp; literally, since the thief persisted in trying to wriggle free — until the Kid delivered a punch under which his captive wilted.

Not until afterward did the Kid understand that he was being treated with much leniency and consideration. He did not know much about jails, but he did wonder a little when he was held in the office instead of being thrown into a cell as he had expected; or that repellent place he had heard spoken of as a tank. His companion sagged limply on a chair in the corner, his stolen hat on the back of his head, his evil mouth half open. The blue shirt had lost its sheen in spots. The Kid had been rather thorough.

His cab driver conferred with the cops, and the cops leaned over the desk and conversed in undertones with the man behind it. They did not seem to be in any particular hurry, nor

did they seem particularly wrought up over the affair. Young fellows, the cops were; the Kid guessed maybe they could sympathize with a fellow in his position. Maybe they'd have done the same as he had, if they weren't cops and had got on the trail of a sneak thief.

Finally the cab drivers signed their names to something or other — the Kid was too busy keeping an eye on his thief to see all that transpired at the desk — and, buttoning their coats and settling their caps in obvious preparation for departure, came over to where he waited.

They wanted their fare. The Kid's driver wanted fare from the stadium to the branch police station, though the Kid didn't see how he figured it, and told him so, pointing out that he hadn't ridden in the cab more than half a mile at the most, and he certainly hadn't asked him to come away down town. But the driver repeated the amount that he expected — which was a dollar and a half. It was a poor place to argue, so the Kid paid it and made a mental note of the driver's number. Sometime, maybe, he'd see that driver again when no cops were by.

"Well, whenever you wanta start somethin', just let me know, willya?" grated the driver,

and walked off, grinning impudently back at the Kid from the door. Oh, well, there was a whole week to settle with *him* —

Harlan's name, spoken by the man behind the desk, brought the Kid's full attention back to his present predicament. The name had been spoken into the telephone, and the sergeant — if that was his official rating — was evidently waiting until Harlan could be located. The Kid waited also, hot with resentment and shame. Why drag Harlan into it? What business was it of Harlan's if Montana Kid went to jail for fighting in a yellow cab? He didn't want Harlan to know anything about this; he might mention it to that darned girl, and then she *would* razz him the next time — but there wouldn't be any next time; he'd see to that.

The desk sergeant was talking into the 'phone, telling his name, which was Dugan, and the station — all Greek to the Kid. He wondered if Harlan was at the other end of the line. The cab driver who had brought them here was still hanging around, probably wanting to collect damage for that glass partition. Well, he could take it off the thief; the Kid would be darned if *he'd* pay it; not when

this fellow had rammed his big foot through it —

The Kid started and gave another look at the fellow's feet. Since when had low shoes come into fashion with riders? Even if he had felt the need of stealing shirt and chaps and hat, a contest rider would have worn riding boots; old and run down at the heels, maybe, but boots of some sort.

This fellow was no rider, in spite of the fact that a contestant's badge dangled from the breast of the blue shirt. Now that his attention was called to it, the Kid was sure of it. His face, for instance, mean and pasty and untanned — certainly no range man, with that indoor pallor. He never had been tanned. Why, then, had he stolen these things? He wasn't even wearing the chaps; meant to sell them, maybe. The Kid decided within himself that the fellow was just a plain nut, though a hard one.

"Yeah, two of them," the man at the telephone was saying in a voice that carried distinctly to where the Kid sat. "What's that? . . . Yes — yes, both of them . . . Yes, that's — well, I didn't book 'em yet . . . Y' — yes, that's the idea. . . . Yeah. . . . Sure, I'll

hold 'em here till you come. . . . Well, I didn't want to — yeah, that's right. Look bad for the rodeo. . . . Okay, Mr. Harlan — g'bye." He turned and fixed a speculative gaze upon the Kid, let his glance move slowly to the other and come to rest there. After a minute or so of staring he beckoned to one of the others and mumbled something. Both stared.

The shirt thief stirred, tried to lift himself from his slumped position. He opened his eyes, glanced around until he saw the chaps lying on the floor where one of the policemen had flung them. A peculiar, furtive look crept into his eyes; his thin mouth pinched in at the corners.

The Kid, watching him suspiciously, followed his glance to the chaps; clumsy, long-haired Angora, lying there almost as if they had legs in them. The Kid thrust out a long leg and pushed them with the toe of his boot, pushed them again, leaned forward and pulled them toward him by the buckle while the other snarled at him to leave them alone; a muttered oath and a threat which the officers would not hear.

"Mind your own business; you stole these

too, and the hat. I know the fellow you took them from. The badge too, very likely. What are all these strings for?" The Kid's fingers were poking and prying. "What's the big idea here?" He lifted the chaps, pulled them across his knee, began to twitch at certain knotted thongs, crudely lacing the chap legs into bags.

"Damn you, leave 'em alone!" The thief lunged toward him, snatching at the chaps. But the Kid eluded his clutching fingers as the two policemen grappled with the fellow and snapped handcuffs on his wrists. The Kid was still busy with the strings. They loosened and he plunged his hand into the orifice thus opened.

"Well for the heck sake!" he ejaculated, and dragged the chaps toward the desk. "You better do something about this, Mr. Officer. This thing's full of money! Where do you suppose he got it? That drunken cow-puncher he robbed certainly didn't have it on him, and there certainly wasn't any money in my suitcase for him to steal." The Kid stared bewilderedly at the package of bank notes in his hand.

"Give it here, young feller," said the desk sergeant. "Mr. Harlan just reported that some

cowboy held up the business office and robbed 'em. Looks like this is the bandit, eh? You grabbed more'n your shirt when you grabbed that guy."

"Well for the crying-out-loud!" gasped the Kid, unconsciously borrowing Boy's favorite expletive.

Harlan arrived, anxious-eyed and in a desperate hurry. His face cleared when they showed him the contents of the hairy chaps piled on the desk, and he almost hugged the Kid when they told him how the thief had been caught.

"I must call up the office — Cowboy, you certainly have saved us a big loss, and you may be sure you won't lose anything by it; nor you, Sergeant, for the splendid way you've handled the case."

The Kid could not see where he had done anything unusual, nor the sergeant either, who had merely sat there at the desk killing time. He wanted his shirt. When Harlan was through telephoning he told him so.

Harlan laughed.

"Take that boy's shirt off the crook and let him have it," he directed in the easy, authoritative tone he had used to his chauffeur. "He's

earned it, don't you think? If he hadn't kept right after that shirt, there's no telling when we'd ever have caught this fellow. When you lock him up, Sergeant, I think you will find he has a criminal record already. The nerve and the cunning he displayed proves to my mind that he's a professional. How he managed to make that hole in the closet wall without being detected — it certainly looks to me as though he had planned this robbery away in advance. He must have been hiding in there for some time — "

A great light broke upon the Kid's mind. He looked so full of information that Harlan stopped and waited expectantly.

"I never told anybody I rated a spook the first night I stayed in the stadium," said the Kid. "I kept missing things out of the kitchen every night — some one always cooked a meal in there. I thought maybe it was some hobo, or else Norm was trying to kid me, perhaps. I used to try and catch him at it, but I never could, and anyway, I kept pretty close to the horses at night. A little grub wasn't so important; but with some one prowling around there nights, I couldn't take a chance. Those horses are about all I've got, and I couldn't

contest without them. So — well, maybe that sounds pretty self-centered, but I can't help it. That's the way I felt about it."

"Just about as self-centered as going after your shirt the way you did, Cowboy! We can forgive that kind of self-centeredness, but I'd call it persistence, myself. Hope it wins you the championship — it certainly ought to, at least." Harlan laughed and patted his arm. Harlan could well afford to laugh and pat, with thirty thousand of the rodeo's dollars back in his possession.

"This is your spook, without a doubt," the desk sergeant declared. "We'd like your secretary to come and identify him, as a matter of form, of course. I've got an idea we'll find this man's finger prints and mug in our gallery, Mr. Harlan, and that will let him in for the limit. Could you bring your people over in the morning? Needn't bother to-night."

"I certainly shall. And, Sergeant, I want to thank you for the splendid way you have handled this matter. If you had simply booked these two men and locked them up, we'd have been put to no end of trouble and worry before we discovered the thief. We certainly are grateful to you for calling the office — "

"Oh, that's all right," grinned the sergeant. "Our boys are pretty easy on cowboys, right now. Can't expect 'em to know all the rules and regulations; we aim to give you all the coöperation we can, Mr. Harlan. Any of your boys get in trouble for small offences — like fighting in cabs — " he grinned slowly at the Kid " — and collecting shirts on the main thoroughfares, you can rest assured we'll do the best we can for 'em. This cab driver has got a claim for damages to his cab, by the way — "

"Oh, I'll take care of that, and glad to!" chuckled Harlan. "Our First Cowboy has been distinguishing himself in several events to-day, but personally I think he's won the trophy for thief-catching. Eh, Cowboy?"

"Thanks, Mr. Harlan. I was merely trying to get my shirt back. And," he added dryly, "I haven't got it yet."

"Hey, you, shuck that shirt!" roared the policeman who had held the gun in at the cab window. "Don't let me tell yuh again, either!"

While the thief sullenly divested himself of the now celebrated garment and flung it savagely at the Kid, Harlan spoke briefly and privately with the cab driver; and from the

quick smile of gratitude on the driver's cynical mouth as he turned to the door, one might assume that the damages had been paid several times over. Which was merely Harlan's way.

"I'd like to take the chaps and the hat and badge back to the fellow who owns them," the Kid next suggested. "And if you're through with me here, I'd like to get back to the stadium right away. The ponies ought to be fed; they've got a lot of work ahead of them this evening."

No one stopped him, so the Kid took that as permission to go. He shook the legs of the chaps to make sure the money was all out, flung them across his arm, along with the shirt from which the square gun-metal badge dangled by its narrow black strap, snatched up the stolen hat and dashed out in time to hail the cab as it was easing away from the curb.

Inside the sub-station office two policemen, the desk sergeant and the influential Mr. Harlan looked at one another. One policeman shook his head in a gesture of complete bafflement, and the other thrust his tongue in his cheek to head off a delighted grin.

"He'll win," the sergeant observed sententiously, nodding his head toward the door. "Steam roller couldn't stop that boy when he gets started!"

Had you told the Kid that he had walked off with Exhibit A, B and C of the evidence, he wouldn't have known what you were talking about; though of course they were not especially needed just then.

"That boy could get away with murder!" one policeman said to the other, as they mounted their motorcycles to ride away.

"Sure could, with Jim Harlan to back him," said the other.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"IT WASN'T ANYTHING"

IN that singleness of purpose which had brought him to Chicago the Kid dismissed the affair as settled and done with. He had his shirt, Harlan had his money back, the police had the thief. Beautifully simple, eminently satisfactory and no more to be said — except when he ran across yellow-cab driver Number Nineteen. That gratitude stuff of Harlan's was, in the Kid's opinion, all blah; polite but foolish, because he had merely been attending to his own personal affairs and had served the rodeo committee by accident, as it were. He was glad they had their money again, but no more glad than he was to have his shirt back. It had cost him two dollars and a half in cab fare, but he would have more money that night, unless something went wrong in the relay race.

That thought remained to harass him until he reached his horses and found the Laramie

boys waiting, full of the contest and the robbery and the mystery of the Kid's absence. When they spied his tall, slender figure coming down through the stables clad in the familiar blue and taking long steps in his haste, they whooped and made for him, fairly babbling their relief.

"D' you feed the horses, Walt?" The Kid broke into their chorus.

"N-o — never thought of it." Walt shook his head. They had been haled before the committee to be identified as bandits, had answered innumerable questions about themselves and about Montana Kid, and had been wild with worry over his disappearance. How could he expect that they would remember to feed the horses? Hadn't they just come, in the faint hope of finding him there?

"Where you been, Kid? Don't you know — "

"After my shirt. Got it too," the Kid answered succinctly, flinging the chaps and hat down upon the saddle of the owner and picking up the oats basin. "Have to send it to the cleaner's, darn it. That'll bust me flat if I don't get some day money." He filled and carried the basin to Stardust who nickered

eagerly for his supper and set the other two pawing and teasing.

"Say, the office was held up and robbed, and — "

"Yeah, I know. They've got it back. Got the fellow in jail." The Kid casually informed them, coming back for more oats.

"They did? When was that? How do *you* know?"

"Saw Harlan a little bit ago," the Kid evaded, busying himself with the horses. "Fork some hay in here, will you, boys? Then we'll have to go eat. Six o'clock — we'll have to make it a light supper, for that only gives us two hours and a half till contest time again. I've got eggs enough, and bread — it'll be toast and soft-boiled eggs for us to-night. Good thing I forgot to turn in the key of the kitchen. If it isn't in use — "

"Kitchen?" Incredulity sharpened all three voices.

"You bet. Kitchen. Where you cook stuff. I've been baching here for a week and more. Fellow gave me the key to a swell kitchen — wait till you see it!" On that subject the Kid was loquacious enough to satisfy the most inquisitive.

Once more the stadium was magically empty except for the hostlers and a few laggard contestants and the clean-up gang at work getting ready for the evening performance. Rows of lights twinkled in all the corridors; their footsteps sounded loud and clumping as they made their way to the kitchen.

"I should think they'd use this now, but I guess everybody eats down town — but us. We're the only broke guys in this show, looks like. How'd you fellows make out after I left?"

While he boiled coffee and eggs and made toast for the four, they told him in great detail how they had fared. The Kid listened and nodded approval, distributing sympathy and praise impartially as the recital seemed to require. When they swung to the robbery, however, that remote look which his mother so dreaded to see crept into his face; though with three young men each eager to give his version and explain his reaction to the implication that he might possibly be a bandit, the Kid's reticence passed unnoticed.

"And they didn't grab you and search your

soul for guilt?" Walt finally demanded curiously. "How come?"

"Well, the fact that the thief was already in jail and they found the money in his possession before I saw Harlan, might possibly have something to do with it," the Kid squelched them. "They aren't going to keep right on looking for him after they've got him, do you suppose? Snap out of it, fellows! Get your gigantic intellects to work figuring how I'm going to nick a few more seconds off my remount in the relay. That's what's worrying me now."

Beck Wilson looked up from breaking an egg into a teacup.

"Can't nick many seconds off nothin' flat," he stated positively. "I'll bet money you weren't two seconds in station any time to-day. Only way I can see is for you to leave before you arrive, Kid."

"That's right," Walt attested. "You've got to get off the ground, take your saddle and put it on the other horse and get on. It's humanly impossible to do it much quicker than you did to-day."

"Much! There you are — there's the slack I've got to take up, boys. I've been thinking

about the cinch. We're allowed any kind we want — it's got to be fastened, or I'll pull it off, mounting. I'm going to make it a flying mount from now on. I've got to. That black and that pinto — *ow-w!* D' you see what they nearly did to me? I thought my ponies were fast, but — "

"You've got 'em beat at the station, Kid. They don't handle the way yours do," Billy comforted. "That guy's got to take up his brakes; he sure has! They can run, all right, but they can't stop. Why, that black horse — " He broke off abruptly, staring at the door.

Two men were letting themselves into the kitchen which the Kid had told them was not being used by any one save himself. The first pulled a key from the lock as he came in, and the second glanced around at the room with what is sometimes called a photographic eye, which he presently fixed curiously upon the group at the end of the long table.

"Hello, Cowboy," the leader greeted with a heartiness that smacked of insincerity, as if it had been manufactured for the occasion.

The Kid, who was officiating as cook, had just lifted an egg out of a pan of boiling water and was watching to see how quickly the air

dried the shell, which old Patsy at the Flying U had taught him as a simple and efficient way of testing its inner degree of hardness. He glanced up from the egg, his eyes veiling themselves instantly with that aloofness of his. As plainly as words his look asked the intruders what they wanted there.

"Hello, Mr. Norm," he said, and laid the egg on Walt's plate. Norm had probably come to kick them out of there. The Kid decided to have his supper first, anyway. By to-morrow they might be rich enough to eat in a restaurant up town.

But Norm had no such harmless design upon the Kid. He turned with a forced laugh to his companion.

"Well, Mac, here they are, where they can't get away. The tall one dishing up eggs is Montana Kid in one of his gentler moods. Don't know the other boys, but they're the blue-shirt bunch, and that's what you wanted." He looked at the Kid, standing there eyeing them, his big hat pushed back on his head, his blue sleeves rolled to his elbows, the egg spoon still in his hand. "This fellow's from the *News,*" he explained. "He wants you to tell him all about how you captured the bandit

that looted our office. Somebody saw you fellows headed this way — well, I guess he can make out all right, now he's found you, I'm busy." He grinned and retreated, carefully closing the door upon himself.

"This is simply great, finding you fellows all here together and no one to butt in," said the reporter, coming forward and helping himself to a seat. "I've got to rush this story in — wish I could have brought a camera man — we'll get your pictures to-morrow. Now, Mr. Montana Kid, I wish you'd tell me just how it was you got on the trail of this bandit? What first roused your suspicion?"

The Kid simply stared at him for a minute and then turned his back and dipped out another egg, watched it dry all too soon and offered it to Beck and Billy.

"Which of you likes the yolk set?" he asked. "Billy, think you can handle it?"

Billy nodded absently, his eyes clinging fascinated to the stranger.

"Is he stringing us, Kid? Or what?"

"You tell 'em," the Kid advised shortly. "I'm no mind reader."

"Say, don't you ever think he's no mind

reader!" The reporter laughed, unabashed by his cool reception, as reporters must ever be. "I'll say he's a mind reader. If all I heard is true, he read that bandit's mind a block away. Made the prettiest capture this burg has seen in many a day. Oh, I've got the whole story," he boasted to the Kid, who looked ready to do murder. "All I want is your own personal reactions — "

"I haven't got any personal reactions," said the Kid. "I don't carry 'em any more. They ain't safe. They're liable to go off unexpected and hurt somebody."

"Did you catch the bandit, honest, Kid? You told us it was your shirt."

"Well, it was. How about another piece of toast, Walt? Riding bronks is exercise, what I mean."

The reporter was busy scribbling something on a small pad of paper he drew from his coat pocket. Billy Perry, who sat alongside him and had eyes like a bald eagle looking for breakfast, told the Kid afterwards that he saw "Blue-s hero modest — denies — tall, slim, handsome as Greek — " and he would have read more if the reporter had not moved his elbow and blocked the view.

"You won the relay race this afternoon, they tell me. You expect to win again this evening, of course?"

The Kid just looked at him and said "Hunh!" eloquently, under his breath.

"I hear you boys have clubbed together to win all the cups in the contest this year," Mac insinuated smilingly.

"That's a thought," the Kid observed gravely, handing Walt a slice of toast on the end of a long-handled fork.

"Dandy start too, I hear. They say you're a knock-out at fancy roping and riding, Mr. Montana Kid."

"Washout, you probably mean." The Kid poured himself a cup of coffee, took off his hat and sat down to his supper.

"No, knock-out. And what are you going to do with all the money you'll win? Don't mind telling me, do you?"

"Delighted," said the Kid. "I'm going to send my little sisters and brothers to school, and buy maw a washin' machine — and take 'em all to the movin' pitchers and set in the best darn seats they got."

The reporter gave him a sharp look but he wrote it all down, so Billy said; probably be-

cause it came under the heading of personal reactions.

"Now tell me, Kid, what were your thoughts when you collared that bandit? You know, they've identified him as the Weasel, one of our slipperiest crooks. Just what did you think when you grabbed him?"

The Kid studied the question while he salted and peppered his eggs.

"I thought, 'Gosh-I-hope-I-don't-tear-my-shirt,'" he said finally.

"He tried to kill you, they tell me."

"The cops in this town sure have telling ways," said the Kid.

"But he did try to kill you, didn't he?"

"Oh, say not so!" the Kid picked up the cup of sugar, looked at it reflectively and set it down again without taking any.

"Ease through with the info, Kid," Beck Wilson advised. "We're all excited. Is this straight goods, or is it a plant?"

"It's a plant, Beck," the Kid answered him, smiling for the first time since the unwelcome visitor arrived.

"Oh, come now!" the reporter protested. "You may as well face the thing, you know—"

"I'm weak on botany," the Kid explained further to Beck, "but it's some kind of loco." Whereupon the three Laramie boys chortled with glee.

"You were born in Montana, weren't you?"

"Oh, no. Chicago."

"But —"

"Well, what's wrong with that? Lots of people are born in Chicago, aren't they? That's where my mother says I was born, and you can like it or not." Since he was telling the truth, the Kid was not believed. At least, Billy said afterward that the reporter wrote down "Born — Mont."

"Well, come on, boys," said the Kid, reaching for his hat and standing up. "Sorry we can't stay and visit, Mister, but we're busy right now."

For some distance in the corridor the reporter kept up with the four, and he asked questions as long as he had breath. But they outwalked him at last and retired to the stables and did not appear again until the grand entry. They had to plan some means of speeding up the Kid's changes of mounts in the relay, impossible though it seemed to do so; and they had to get the true story of the Kid's

adventure with the bandit, though that, too, was next to impossible, since the Kid belittled his own part in the performance. Still, they forced the main facts from him bit by bit and had to be content.

"And I want you fellows to keep still about it too," the Kid finally told them, as they were riding out to the slope for the grand entry. "I headed off that darned reporter, so that's all right and we won't hear any more out of him, I guess, and if you boys don't talk, the thing will die down. It wasn't anything, anyway."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"MRS. BENNETT — MONTANA KID!"

ONCE more the waving banners, once more the flags and the blare of music that sent the double column forward up the track past the grand stand and around the oval to the point where they rode straight out across the arena and drew up in semi-military formation before the cheering thousands. But now the great arc lights threw a white radiance upon the scene, and the visiting celebrities did not participate in the opening ensemble. The Kid missed the Happy Family and in spite of his other distractions he wondered where they were. Also he had sent a quick, searching glance up at the box as he passed, and saw it filled with strangers. His folks hadn't cared to come out in the evening, then. Bored already, he supposed.

The Kid told himself that it made no difference, that he was really glad they stayed

away; but for all that he was conscious of a queer, lonesome, heavy feeling in his chest. All those thousands and thousands of people staring down upon him, and not a single one he knew, or that knew him or cared whether he lost or won! He was just one contestant among a hundred and fifty or so; part of the show, the same as one of the horses. Only for Beck and Billy and Walt there beside him the sense of desolation would have been intolerable. But he had his work to think of — the relay, and the calf roping especially. That was where they counted the seconds on a fellow — yes, the fractions of a second. He was contesting against a fast bunch of boys too. He'd have to buck up and put his mind strictly on his work; forget the crowds.

As he rode back for Stardust and his ropes, however, the mood of depression still held him. What ailed him? Eggs too hard, giving him indigestion? That bandit stuff? That darned reporter nosing around? A little of all three, he decided, and immediately felt better. Anything like that he could handle; but he certainly would be disgusted with himself if he thought for a minute the folks' staying

away had anything to do with it. No, he was actually glad they weren't here. There was nothing now to distract his mind.

He was standing with Stardust in the passage before the gate, waiting for the bareback riding to finish and the roping act to be announced. He was thinking all these things about his mood, when Harlan appeared from nowhere, apparently, and grasped him by the arm.

"Tie your horse here, Cowboy. I want you for a minute," he said briskly. And when the Kid had done as he was told, Harlan opened a smaller gate and led him into the press box, which was just behind the fence and filled with chairs and people.

"Mrs. Bennett, I want to introduce Montana Kid, the hero of this rodeo," he said cordially. "This is the boy who caught the robber with the money hidden in the legs of a pair of stolen chaps, as I was telling you. Mr. Bennett, Mr. Whitmore, this is Montana Kid."

Had Harlan dashed a quart of ice water in his face the shock would have been less. The Kid stood in bleak silence while they looked at him.

"Well, Claude, aren't you going to give your only mother a kiss?" the Little Doctor demanded with a short laugh that eased the awkward situation perceptibly.

"Sure," said the Kid, and kissed her while the blood pounded like hammers against his temples. "How are you, Dad? Hello, Uncle J. G., taking in the rodeo, are you? How's your rheumatism?"

Afterward, the Kid tried to remember what he had said and how he had acted while he said it, and found that, like the actual moment of a collision, his memory refused to register. He was afraid he had been a complete washout, as he expressed it. But he couldn't have been that, because in discussing him afterward his mother spoke of his absolute poise and coolness, and wondered where he had learned the grand manner; his dad had called it a swelled head and declared that he'd be damned if the young whelp could patronize him like that. It would have comforted the Kid no doubt to have overheard them and to know that at any rate they did not suspect his actual stupefaction.

"Why that particular shade of blue, Claude?" his mother asked irrelevantly; prob-

ably because it was the most trivial thing she could think of at the moment.

"Why? Don't you like it?"

"It would make a gorgeous sofa pillow."

"I'll try and remember to save you the pieces, then. How do you like the show, Dad?"

"Pretty good, in spots," said Chip, stubbornly refusing to praise the young whelp.

"They've run in some race horses on yuh, Kid," grumbled the Old Man. "Why don't yuh complain to the judges about it? A relay is for cow ponies. Dog-gone it, they got no business to let in track horses."

"Oh, that's all right, Uncle. Stardust's got running blood himself. I guess I'll get by, all right."

"Cowboy," cried Harlan, "I never suspected I was making a family reunion of this! Now I know why I sort of liked you, that day I met you on the road; because you look and act so much like your dad, that's why. You must have wanted to keep it a secret — your dad knew there would be nothing too good for his boy, here! But you see, blood will tell, no matter how you try to hide it. You're your father's own son, I can see that

now. You'll win, all right. You're too much like your dad not to win!"

"Oh, I don't know," drawled the Kid, and sent a swift, sidelong glance at his father, staring out across the arena at a convulsive bronk that was hopeful of shedding his rider. "I guess we don't notice so much resemblance, in the family."

"Well, it's there, nevertheless. See you a little later, folks. Good luck to you, Cowboy!" and Harlan, having innocently done what damage he could, hurried away and left them.

But there was scant leisure for embarrassment, for another person breezed into the roomy press box.

"Oh, hello, Cowboy blue! Has Dad been blowing your horn, as usual?"

The Kid turned and found himself looking down into the impish eyes and the demure face of Dulcie Harlan.

"Where's your bandit?" she asked, not waiting for him to answer her first thrust.

"Back here in a cage," the Kid retorted, his brain still functioning without the help of his mind, it seemed, since he had no idea that he was going to say just that. "Tame him and train him for a pet, if you want him."

"I know how you tame them! I heard all about that terrible beating you gave him. Aren't you the least bit ashamed of yourself?"

"No. I love to torture dumb brutes."

"I know. I saw you doing it to-day. But it does seem — "

"Claude," said his mother, turning half around and looking up at him where he stood behind her, "you might come and see us, don't you think?" The Little Doctor must have been greatly perturbed, not to have noticed Dulcie Harlan behind her.

"I don't know where you're staying."

"Write down the address. The Drake Hotel, corner of Michigan and — well I don't remember the other street — "

The Kid unbuttoned the flap of his shirt pocket, drew out a small memorandum book in which he had started a condensed schedule of his team's contest record, and obediently wrote down the name of the hotel.

"I don't know when I can come," he hedged uncomfortably. "I may not get out at all. I'm — I'll be busy every minute of the contest, just about."

"Why? You running the whole show with-

out any help at all?" Chip spoke dryly, glancing over his shoulder at the Kid.

The Kid winced under his father's well-known sarcasm, then his lips formed the stubborn, bitter lines they had worn in that last interview at the Flying U.

"Well," he retorted, "I'm running my part of it without any help, you notice."

Here Miss Dulcie took it upon herself to distract his attention and avert the impending unpleasantness.

"Will you explain to me, bandit-beater, why you are wearing that S.A.E. pin out of sight under your pocket flap?" she demanded severely. "A Sigma Alpha Epsilon pin on a wild, man-eating, broncho-busting — "

"Oh, that?" The Kid tilted the diamond-shaped, jeweled pin of his favorite fraternity so that the letters showed more definitely. "You're all wrong, Miss Harlan. That stands for 'Some Are Easy.' It refers to bandits, bronks, flappers — "

"Claude!" This, of course, from his mother.

"Well, glad to have met you all," drawled the impenitent Kid as he turned to go. "Have to tear myself away; got to collect a few more records — cups and things." It was sheer bra-

vado, flung out in desperation lest his father should see his hurt.

"And you'll go on collecting long time on your alleged calf roping too, I suppose!" twitted Chip, quite as angry and hurt as was the Kid.

"It would be just too bad if I won the championship, wouldn't it?" sneered the Kid, and got out of there before his dad could think of another unforgivable taunt.

"You know that only makes him worse, Chip," the Little Doctor reproached in an undertone. And then to the girl, "You mustn't mind Claude, Dulcie. I'm afraid he's a spoiled boy."

"Mind him? Why, I think he's terribly funny!" She laughed quite convincingly when she said it, but there were teeth marks in her under lip, and there was a look in her eyes, as she watched the Kid mount his horse and ride out through the gate, that boded no good for him when they met again. And she hoped it would be soon.

The Kid did not share that hope. On the contrary, he was thinking how he hoped some one would shoot him if he ever spoke to her again, or gave his dad another chance to insult

him like that. When the little trick-roper eased her horse closer and sent him her shy, wistful smile, the Kid smiled back and, because they were within speaking distance of the press box, rode boldly to her side and stayed there until they were called for the roping event. He could not afterwards recall their conversation, but he learned that her name was Joella Germain, a jingly combination which he remembered.

But Joella could not erase his resentment for Dulcie, nor his hot anger against his dad. He went to the trick roping half hating it because he felt his father's scoffing gaze upon him. He was probably saying — or at least thinking — that the Kid was out there showing off. There was no danger, no risk, not even an element of chance in this performance. The Kid was sorry he had entered for this particular contest. It came too close to the relay race, anyway.

While he hopped in and out of his whirling loops, gyrated and stood on his head and turned somersaults, the Kid made up his mind that this was the last time he'd do it. He had thought it was easy money, and it was for one of his agile skill. But it was taking just so

much energy, and he was going to need it for the other events; especially now that he had taken on the bronk riding, which he hadn't intended to do.

He had to think of the relay race which followed immediately. He had to beat that fast string, the black and the pinto. Using Stardust in this roping act and then putting him right out against that black horse — the others he dismissed from his mind — was asking too much of any horse. It was asking too much of himself, for that matter. This was hard work, and while he liked it, he had to use some sense. It was the relay race that counted most in the beginning of the program.

He did not own to himself that he couldn't face the prospect of clowning out there before his folks and Dulcie Harlan, but he was conscious of their scornful regard and he hated every minute of the act. The applause was too loud and too continuous — it sounded to him derisive; especially when he knew he was not doing as well as he could; not half as well, for he was leaving Stardust out of it except at the last, when he let the horse gallop back and forth a few times, more to warm him up for the race than for any other reason. And he

couldn't get away from it — the clapping was out of all proportion. He didn't like it.

What the Kid did not know was that the rodeo had a keen and enterprising publicity man who had told the story of the robbery, the Kid's exploit in the taxi, the blue shirt and all — told it arrestingly into a dozen pairs of ears best fitted to receive it in the proper spirit. The Kid never dreamed that every broadcasting station in town had repeated that story during their dinner program. It was legitimate news, so fresh that it had not yet seen print. It was picturesque, it was amusing, it was just the kind of thing that could be talked about and laughed at over the dinner tables of Chicago. Think of the very name of the hero — Montana Kid! Montana Kid, hot in pursuit of a blue satin shirt, jumping into a yellow cab and tackling one of Chicago's most dangerous crooks as he was making his getaway from one of his most daring robberies! It tickled Chicago, the sophisticated, weary of gang wars. Families who had not thought of going to the rodeo that night put on their hats and hailed the early busses so as to avoid the crowd. They went because they wanted to see Montana Kid, and his blue shirt that he val-

ued so highly. Even those blasé sceptics who declared it was all framed, a publicity stunt pulled off to bring out the crowds, even they went, some of them, just to see how many dumb-bells had fallen for the story, anyway. You know it really is amazing how little it takes sometimes to start the world running after a hero; or any man, for that matter.

But the Kid did not know all that. When he lined up with his rivals for the relay race, he had no idea what the crowd was yelling about. Had any one told him the truth, that they were yelling at him and his blue satin shirt, he would have taken it for granted he was being razzed for some reason, but it never would have occurred to him to believe the statement.

Once more Stardust got away cleanly and left the field streaming behind like the lengthening tail of a comet, with the black two lengths ahead. And a roar of voices kept pace with them, like a tidal wave of sound sweeping abreast of them around the track.

"Go on, Kid! Go on, Montana Kid! GO ON!"

It caught the Kid by the throat, it thrust him down upon the straining neck of the sor-

rel; a yellow streak with a blotch of parrot blue shining along the whipping mane. It lifted Stardust over the space, pulled him up and up along the side of the black horse. It brought him under the wire nose by nose and flung the Kid off at his station — which was Number One to-night — and up and on past the lunging horses and frantic riders trying to tighten cinches and mount.

"Go on, Kid! Go ON!"

That steady cry surging around the great oval, Sunup running like a scared rabbit and the fast little pinto inexorably lessening the distance between them, but never quite passing — and so into the station where Walt was holding Stardust.

"They're with yuh, Kid!" Walt shouted, and had no time for more, because the Kid was off again, picking up the black horse as he flashed past, almost uncannily like a friendly agreement. But always that tremendous, composite Voice rolling around the stadium:

"Montana Kid, GO ON!"

The horses felt it and responded. Strides lengthened. Legs worked like speeded pistons. But the black, on the last curve, failed to hold his stride. Stardust flew like a sweeping

yellow bird, blown before a gale. Then Sunup, seconds ahead of the pinto in the start, flashing past the laggards not yet in from their third lap!

When the Kid rode under the wire on the last lap, safely the winner, the mass mind that had urged him on brought the crowd upon its feet, cheering and shrieking. No Olympic game won for America will send the onlookers into greater hysteria, perhaps. It was the moment of madness that sometimes seizes a crowd. The radio story, told with a full appreciation of the human-interest angle that always clicks; the Kid himself, unwittingly revealing a certain lovable quality of youth and grace and skill in the roping, and then the thrill of that race — even the subtle mind of the publicity man must have been astounded at the results he produced that night.

And the Kid, sore at heart and holding himself aloof from every one, never suspected the truth.

Not even when he rode out to rope his calf, with his teeth clenched and his mind stubbornly determined to show his dad something, did he realize that the applause was abnormal. He had the best time made that evening —

eighteen and one-fifth seconds — and that seemed reason enough for the tumult.

It was the same when he rode the bronk assigned to him. Chile Bean was a bad one, the kind the cowboys called salty. The Kid rode him and broke no rules, so far as he knew. The crowd cheered wildly, but the carping criticism which he imagined as emanating from where his folks sat in the press box neutralized the frenzied enthusiasm of the seventy or eighty thousand other people who watched him. Dad hated him, was his bitter thought. Dad didn't believe he could do anything as well as the Happy Family. Dad would go out of his way to crow over him if he made a flop at anything. Dad was sneering at everything he did — but he couldn't sneer at that calf roping!

So far as the crowd was concerned, that was the Kid's night. Every one knew it save the Kid himself, who could not forget the things that had been said in the few minutes he spent with his folks. He tried to forget, tried to interest himself in the trick riding. Joella Germain was a sweet little thing — she'd kill herself doing that crawl, unless she learned the proper hand-hold. The Kid forced himself

to smile, to talk, to explain, and wound up by making a date with her for the next morning, to show her and let her practise under his coaching.

But his heart was not in it and he was glad when it was all over and he could ride back into the quiet of the stables, away from the noise and confusion and the staring strangers who eyed him curiously, as if he were some strange animal. He had won the relay race for the day — a hundred dollars. He stood third in the calf roping; was "in the money," to the extent of forty dollars. For the bronk riding he had the second place and sixty dollars. Walt won third money, Beck Wilson first in the steer wrestling, Billy Perry third in the steer riding. As a team, they could pat themselves on the back and feel proud and plutocratic, and did. But the Kid himself was bitter and rather heartsick and could not glory in anything at all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FAME BUT FEEDS THE FEUD

OVER by the chutes the Luis Mendoza company — or that part of it which was on location at the Chicago rodeo — was waiting while director and camera man conferred together concerning the side lines they should use for some "full shots" they meant to take. A nice question of authenticity was at stake. They must give their leading man plenty of scope for the bronk riding he was to do this morning, and yet they must preserve the illusion of a crowded stadium; simple enough, if only they could be sure that the bronk would be amenable to direction and would do his bucking within the side lines.

Andy Green, a director's megaphone in his hand and his soft hat pulled over his eyes, squinted and studied and decided that it would be cheaper to hire more extras and string them along the fence beside the chutes than it would be to risk having to remake the bucking scenes

and endanger the star's neck further. The Native Son was one leading man who refused to do his stunt stuff by proxy. The color, the crowds, what in picture parlance is called "atmosphere," would of course be taken during the regular programs, but it was obvious that the actual sequences of the story could not be injected into the contest. These had to be made during the forenoons when the arena was empty and the movie company could have free run of the place. Andy Green and his aids and actors had sat through the afternoon performance that they might grow familiar with the routine and get the feel of the rodeo. Now they were ready for business; or as nearly so as any motion-picture company ever is when the camera is not actually clicking its record of a scene.

"I want to pick up Luis just as the gate opens and he leaves the chute," Andy explained carefully to Gray, the camera man who always shot the full action of a scene while his two assistants worked at different angles. "Carl up there can follow him, no matter what direction he takes, but I want you to get this full shot as he comes out toward us. The boys tell me this bronk is a sure-fire

bucker — a regular walking-beamer; oughta be a dandy on the screen. What I want to know is, how far will I have to spread the extras to hide that aching void around the arena?"

"As far as the horse bucks, if you want me to get all of it," said Gray. "Once he's out and the action starts, there's no telling what angle he'll take, is there? The fence might be in the picture and it might not. I'd use all the men available, Andy. If you want it to match up with yesterday, for instance — "

Andy nodded and walked hurriedly toward a big man who was just entering the arena through the main gate.

"Morning, Tex! Say, where's all those gaudy riders that's been prognosticating around the place?" he wanted to know. "I need some background over there. Luis is going to make his ride — you'd think they'd all be out to see the show," he said plaintively. "A Western star riding a bronk — "

"Quite a few of 'em saw stars riding bronks yesterday," Tex drawled, his eyes atwinkle. "Them that didn't is liable to this afternoon — we've picked a bunch of bronks that's bound

to weed out the would-bes. But I reckon I can maybe haze out a few. A lot of the boys are up town. Some went up last night, and they're mostly bedded down in the hay, tryin' to sleep it off. There's a few wranglers around, though. How many you want?"

"All you can haze out here. I just want 'em to drape themselves along the fence while Luis does a little riding and bulldogging and maybe rides a steer and ropes a calf or two. The light's good this morning and I want to get a lot of good contest action. Then this afternoon I'd like to shoot some good contest stuff, if you don't mind." He cast a critical glance up at the sun, as a gentle hint perhaps to Tex that sunlight was a precious thing to a movie director and not to be wasted. Andy Green made a good director.

So Tex went down through the stables and routed out all the fellows he could find there, and in the course of his search he came across the Kid sitting on a hay bale, scowling at a morning paper which he held spread out before his wrathful countenance. Hats pushed back so the wide brims could not block the view, his team stood closely grouped around him and gazed at the bold black headline

spread across the front page of the morning paper:

RODEO ROBBED! COWBOY
CATCHES BANDIT!
MONTANA KID, COWBOY,
HERO OF DARING HOLDUP
AT STADIUM LAST NIGHT.

$30,000 Stolen
When Lone Bandit Binds
Office Force During Show.

Handsome Young Broncho Buster Loses His Shirt, Which Bandit Stole For Disguise. Seeing His Shirt on Bandit, He Leaps Into Speeding Cab and Subdues One of Chicago's Most Notorious Crooks, Recovering Shirt and Stolen Cash.

The article itself flowed amusingly along from scene to scene, humorously stressing the distress (since alliteration was made a part of the comedy) of Montana Kid when he missed his blue satin shirt. His grief was vividly painted, also his life-and-death determination to find his shirt or perish in the attempt. The robbery was described briefly and accurately

enough for newspaper purposes, also the Kid's pursuit of the bandit, though this was exaggerated. Chicago must have been highly entertained by the alleged antics of a young, simple-souled — simple-minded as well — gawky young savage from the West; a young David of the great open spaces boldly attacking a Goliath of crime. Even the Kid's remarks to the police and the desk sergeant were repeated in garbled form and the conventional dialect of fiction cowboys. It was all very funny, no doubt, and the writer had managed to make the Kid seem engagingly unsophisticated and picturesque and brave. He was also the best rider, the trickiest trick roper, the fanciest fancy rider, the fleetest relay rider of the entire ensemble of champions. He was chain lightning with a rope; he was the fightingest broncho fighter the city could ever hope to see — and personally he was of godlike beauty and as shy as the justly famed violet. Indeed, the violet was mentioned — along with other things.

"Montana Kid neither smokes, drinks nor shoots craps," the writer declared. "He is anxious to win the championship and the more than generous purses, so that his little broth-

ers and sisters may enjoy the benefits of the education he has been denied. He is dreaming of the happy day when he can give his aged mother a vacation from the ranch and take her to see the sights of the nearest city. His idea of luxury is to occupy loge seats in a movie house where they play a band — a real band — and not to care a darn what it costs. His mother — "

"Why, the dirty bum!" The Kid, goaded past the endurance point of reading further, crushed the paper viciously in his hands.

"Wait a minute! Listen to this, Kid: 'Over his simple repast of toast and tea last night Montana Kid blushed to the brim of his six-gallon hat and denied — ' "

"Ah, shut up!" The Kid glared furiously at Walt. "One yip out of you fellows about this zippety-zip blinkety-blank thing and I'll lay yuh cold! For two cents I'd quit the ding-dang rodeo and the — " He choked off further anathemas which were scorching his tongue and stood up, breathing hard through nostrils that quivered like a frightened thoroughbred. The rodeo manager stood regarding him quizzically, his lips caressing an unlighted cigar.

"Fame's a tricky animal, hard to snare," Tex observed obliquely. "You never know your luck, but I'd take all that comes if I was in your place, Kid. Better get out there in the arena, all you boys. They want you in the picture — "

The very word *picture* was like a dart in the flank of a fighting bull. The Kid's face showed a line of dead white around his mouth.

"You tell them to go straight to hell," he said, with a quiet vehemence which could not be questioned. "You tell them if they come within gunshot of me with their damned cameras, I'll shoot the damn guts out of the things. And that goes for my boys too."

"No need to get riled up over it," Tex drawled soothingly. "All they want is — "

"You tell them what I said, will you, please? Or if you won't do it, I'll tell them myself — and there won't be enough left of their cameras to carry home. I'm sorry, Tex, but that's absolutely final." The Kid walked off, and the three followed him, apologizing with their eyes to Tex, who gazed after them curiously before he turned and made his way back to the chutes where Andy was busily placing

the men as they came up in response to Tex's request.

"This is about all, I guess," Tex observed.

"I thought I saw those Laramie boys around here, a little while ago," Andy replied, glancing along the fence at the riders and men afoot. "I wonder if the Kid would mind riding that sorrel out here for a few minutes. He's here somewhere, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he's in the stables," Tex told him. "What's the trouble between him and you folks, Green?" He took the time to light his cigar. "I didn't know you was even acquainted."

"Did he say there was trouble between us?" Andy glanced at the other members of the Happy Family who were standing near.

"Well," said Tex in his drawling voice, "he gave me a message to deliver, and I ain't sure it's going to do any good to anybody. I hate to be talkin' in the dark — "

"What was it, Tex? It may not do any good, but it can't do any harm, either. What did he say?"

"Well, I told him and them other blue shirts to come on over here, that you wanted to use 'em in a picture, and the Kid said you

could go to hell, and to tell you if you ever come near him — "

"I guess we understand," Andy said with a short laugh. "It sounds about like the Kid. He's all pooched out over the publicity he's getting, I suppose. Well, you can tell him we don't want to ruin any film and we'd like him to stay off the lot. Some day," Andy predicted with contemptuous emphasis, "that boy's going to bust. If that conceit of his ever starts working, he'll blow up like a still with the cooling pipe clogged."

"You know him, do you?" Tex's black eyes widened with surprise.

"Know him? Say, I hate to peddle bad news, but that's Chip's boy! Used to be a regular kid, but they sent him to college and he's turned out to be the damnedest — "

"Chip? Chip Bennett?" Tex took his cigar from his mouth and looked it over gravely. "That's who he looks like, come to think of it. I knew he was a dead ringer for somebody, but Chip's dressed different and wears a small hat, and I couldn't seem to place the Kid. What's the trouble between him and his folks? He come here alone — rode all the way from Montana — and he never let on who he was.

Entered as Montana Kid. Seems funny — "

"Ashamed of his folks, maybe; but he ain't half as ashamed as they are of him; or oughta be," snapped Pink. "Wouldn't speak to me yesterday. Passed us up like — like — " Pink's voice trailed off into muttering.

"Seems a nice, quiet boy, I thought." Tex looked from one to the other in puzzled questioning. "Too quiet. I set him down as bashful and sensitive, maybe. He sure is a hummer, though, when he gets on a horse. That boy keeps on like he's started, he'll have the world's championship in another year or two. I should think Chip Bennett would be proud of a boy like him; I know I would."

If the Happy Family felt a rebuke in Tex's words they gave no sign. Andy Green grunted and pulled a dog-eared script from his pocket, frowning as he scanned page after page. Whether he was conscious of the typed words is a question only Andy himself could answer. The Native Son, called Luis by his friends for professional reasons when others were near, signalled languidly to the assistant director who hurried up with a hand mirror into which the Native Son scowled, unseeingly retouching his make-up.

"Bashful and sensitive!" gritted Pink, close beside him. "If he's bashful, I'm a perfect lady!"

"He's a rider, though," Weary reminded them, a troubled look in his eyes as he stared out across the arena. "Tex is right about that. He's so much like Chip used to be, it — damn it, it kind of gets me when I see him going up against these champs alone. He — we ought to be backin' him, damn it! Chip's kid — and not one of the bunch willing to give him a good word or a pat on the back — I tell yuh, boys, it ain't right!"

"Pats on the back's what ails him, Weary," the Native Son said slowly. "Nobody hates this condition of things worse than I do, but I don't see how it's going to be helped when the Kid turns us down cold, the way he does. You know yourself — "

"All right, Luis," Andy called sharply. "You boys get on your horses and be ready to pick up the action when Luis has made his ride. But keep outside the scene, all of you, till I give the word. This horse is going to do straight-forward bucking, they tell me — easy to ride but showy. I want to get all of it I can. And Luis," he added, coming closer and low-

ering his voice, "Tex ain't going to stand over you with a club and make yuh muffle your spurs. I looked this horse over, and he struck me as being an old crow-hopper. So — "

"You want a little action, eh?"

"That's the idea, Mig. It's asking a lot of Tex to use his stock this way, when he's got a whole week of two contests a day. I've got a suspicion he's givin' you a cowgirl's bronk. One of the easy ones."

"Leave it to me, Andy." The Native Son smiled his slow smile, the one that photographed so well. "The way I feel right now, it's action I want and lots of it. You'll get a bucking scene, don't worry."

"Well, don't advertise them spurs. But if you forget the contest rule here, I won't wire in to have yuh fired. And you know, Mig, I don't want to pay for the horse, either!"

"Did you ever know of my cutting up a horse with spurs?" The Native Son frowned. "I know the story and I know the kind of a ride this scene calls for. That's the kind you're going to get, unless the old skate lays down with me."

The Little Doctor, Chip, the Old Man and Boy, with Dulcie Harlan and her father fol-

lowing a few paces behind, appeared suddenly at the little gate beside the chutes.

"Here's your audience, Andy," the Little Doctor called in her clear treble. "We want to see it all without being seen, so where shall we sit?"

Delay followed their coming, while Andy established the group where they would be sure to see all that was going on, and chatted with the Old Man about his rheumatism, which was better — so much so that the Old Man was walking with a cane and the help of some one's sustaining arms — and with the Little Doctor about the scenes they were going to "shoot" that morning, and with Chip who had refused to borrow a cowboy costume and ride with the others. You would think, to see him, that he knew Joshua's technique of making the sun stand still, and would apply it after awhile. But that is the way with movie directors; harried to death but never hurried, however much they may pretend to be.

It took Boy to jar Andy loose and start him to work on the scene.

"Say, Andy, there was a big long piece in the paper about the Kid catchin' a robber — "

"Yeah, I saw it," Andy broke in hastily.

"Well, the light is just about right, now — I've got to go and make Mig earn his salary. You folks will have lunch with us, won't yuh? I've got it ordered at a good place up town — we'll eat at noon and get right down here for the afternoon show. Going to shoot some regular contest scenes." He gave Boy a quick, admonitory glance (wholly wasted) and lifted his megaphone to his mouth.

"All right, folks, we're going to make this without any rehearsal. Outa the scene, everybody! Ready there at the chutes?" He was walking toward the camera all the while he was speaking, and now he stood critically surveying the spot where Luis Mendoza — for the moment not the Native Son — should come hurtling forth from the shallow pen when the gate upon which he now sat was thrown open.

"All right, Luis! Head him straight out and down the field, if you can."

"Say, is this rocking-horse broke to neck rein?" retorted the Native Son, grinning as he let himself down into the saddle, removed his hat and shook back his heavy mane of hair.

"All right?" questioned Andy through the megaphone.

"All right," called the Native Son.

"Gray, I want you to get the gate swinging open, showing Luis on the horse inside. Open the gate — camera!"

The big bay seemed ready to sulk and refuse to come forth, but the Native Son pricked him smartly with the spurs and the horse — they called him Walloper, by the way — stood on his hind feet and came out with a lunge.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BEATEN, BUT NOT WHIPPED

ONCE before in his life Andy misjudged a horse and paid for the mistake in some bitterness. Now he saw how he had erred in his judgment of both Tex and the horse. For Tex had not palmed off any half-hearted bucker on Luis Mendoza and his director, and the Walloper did not require uncovered steel to induce him to perform. The one thing he did do nicely was to run straight out into the field.

He seemed to be an intermittent performer. Three good, high jumps he made straight into the foreground. Then he stopped and stood like a statue until he felt the prick of the spurs, when he hurled himself straight into the air, came down stiff-legged and started running. Now and then he interrupted himself long enough to buck petulantly, and it was those interruptions which kept up Andy's hopes of a good scene. He did not send any one after

his leading man as quickly as he would otherwise have done, so the horse may be blamed for what followed.

The Kid, seeing a bunch of people up around the chutes, was keeping himself and his pupil as far down toward the lower end of the field as possible. He did not want to encounter any newspaper reporters and their cameras, chiefly because he did not want to do murder if he could avoid it. Incidentally, and so as not to attract their attention, he had changed his blue shirt for one of neutral hue — a gray broadcloth which he had worn on the trail. By special request his Laramie boys had also put away the famous blue satin, though it pained them to do so. They were therefore inconspicuous and attending very strictly to their own affairs; which on the part of the Laramie boys consisted of sitting in a row alongside the fence, watching Joella Germain do the revised crawl under the neck of her horse.

Midway across the arena the Kid had stopped her and, on Blazes, since he was saving Stardust for the race that afternoon, proceeded to crawl slowly and deliberately around his horse's neck, explaining the why

and wherefore of every move he made. Joella watched him, careful to miss no move.

"Now, you try it with your horse standing still," he commanded. "Once you get the hang of it, you'll find it easier than the way you do it."

The Kid had his back to the arena. He did not see the Walloper coming until the thud of hoofbeats made him turn to look. He was none to soon, for the bay horse was bearing down upon Joella with the staring, white-rimmed eyeballs a horse usually shows when he is in a frenzy of fear or anger — it doesn't matter much which.

Luckily the Kid had been fooling with his rope while he talked with Joella a few minutes before, and had hung the coil over the saddle horn. He snatched it up, shook out his loops as he whirled to meet the runaway, saw that the horse did not mean to swing away from him, and flung the noose straight for his head. He was just in time. As he took his turns and Blazes settled back, the Walloper was within ten feet of Joella's phlegmatic little gray pony.

"What do you think you're doing?" cried

the Kid, with all the injustice of angry youth. "I told you you needed a double, Mig!"

"Go to the devil!" snapped the Native Son, yanking at the halter rope which was his only means of controlling the bay; and that little better than nothing, as every bronk rider knows. "Take off your rope! Nobody asked you to butt in on this."

"Better get off, before you fall off!" jeered the Kid.

"Take off that rope, or I'll hand you a punch in the jaw," warned the Native Son with a jerky harshness of manner, because the Walloper was at last doing the "walking beam" kind of bucking which Tex had guaranteed.

"Better wait and see how you feel when you pick yourself up," the Kid advised, for the first time in years thoroughly enjoying himself with the Native Son. Joella, it may here be explained, had made haste to gallop back to the fence out of the way, and incidentally out of hearing.

Seeing her gone, the Native Son called the Kid a name he could not have spoken in Joella's presence.

The Kid replied in the same spirit and vocabulary.

"You sure have got a licking coming to you!" declared the Native Son rather breathlessly, wondering if the darned horse was going to buck till noon.

"The way I'll knock the paint off you will be just too bad!" retorted the Kid, as Weary and Pink came galloping swiftly down upon them.

Afterwards the Kid remembered how dexterously the two pocketed the bucking horse between them and how lightly the Native Son swung over the rump of Weary's horse and to the ground.

"Get on behind, Mig, and I'll take you back," Weary said, looking around surprisedly. "No use walking."

The Native Son shook his head, advancing upon the Kid who was coiling his rope, his hatbrim hiding his face.

"Well, get down and take your licking," he said with ominous calm. "You're so full of brag, now back it up."

"Seems a shame to strike an old man," taunted the Kid remorselessly, looking down at him. "Be your age, Grandpa!"

Now, the Native Son had just passed forty, and though he neither looked, felt nor acted middle-aged, the thrust went home. His heavily made-up eyelids closed to slits through which his eyes gleamed like flames. It was the look which made small boys squirm in the front rows of movie theaters, along about the third reel of a Luis Mendoza super-special; the look that thrilled young women of high-school age and beyond and impelled them to buy Luis Mendoza photographs to stand on their dressing tables. It gave the Kid an inexplicable thrill as he stared down into that narrowed gaze; not fear, but rather that thrill of pleasurable excitement which comes when an adventurous youth comes face to face with danger. For one moment the Kid felt as he did when he eased into the saddle and felt a bronk's muscles quiver for the first lunge of the battle to come; then the Native Son reached up and gripped him. The Kid struck fiercely, ineffectively, and came down fighting, still held in that inexorable grasp.

Walt, Beck and Billy came running, but dared not interfere. Those two, evenly matched in all save experience, somehow revealed an inner struggle which concerned no

man save themselves. It showed in their eyes, in the set of their tight-lipped mouths. The Laramie boys looked on helplessly and with a feeling of bewilderment. The Kid had never mentioned Luis Mendoza, never intimated that he knew him. What, then, were they fighting about? Why were they staring eye to eye like that, trying to look each other down? But Pink and Weary knew, though they could not have put the mental conflict into words. Youth and maturity striving for supremacy — they couldn't express it, though they recognized the thing that lay behind the quarrel.

It was not a bloody fight, nor a long one. The Kid had never gone in for fighting, though he had boxed a little in the gym. Luis Mendoza, however, was rather famous for his whirlwind battles as portrayed on the screen. Never a super-special without its fight scene wherein the hero threw men and furniture helter-skelter about the set, emerging from the *mêlée* minus half his shirt and with his heavy mop of brown hair, which he wore long for the purpose, dangling to his eyebrows; battered but victorious and smiling his slow smile as he gazed upon the havoc he had wrought.

The Kid's scornful "Be your age, Grandpa," had turned loose the whirlwind upon himself and he was wholly unprepared to meet it. Yet the Native Son did not want to hurt him overmuch, except in his self-esteem. He did not close the Kid's blazing eyes — how could he strike his fist against eyes so like Chip's in all save the color? Nor did he puff the Kid's lips with a blow he might easily have delivered — those lips which had a Little-Doctor curve when they smiled!

He did worse, in a way. He held the Kid off at arm's length and slapped him soundly, first on one cheek, then on the other, dispassionately and with a look on his face which his movie fans would have adored. He did it so swiftly that the Kid could not seem to organize his own campaign of annihilation, though he tried hard enough.

"You may be hell on a horse," the Native Son told him between smacks, "but you're just an ornery kid that needs a good spanking. Your mother oughta turn you over her knee and paddle you good! Now will you behave? Will you own you're cleaned, and cleaned right?"

Tears of rage stood in the Kid's heavy-lashed eyes. He made one last ineffectual attempt to plant his fist in the Native Son's face, and dropped his hands to his sides. It took moral strength to do that, and Weary, at least, recognized the fact with softened gaze.

"No! I own you're a fighter and I'm not — you've got me stopped, damn you — but I'm not whipped! Some day I'll show you — all of you — Dad too — that I'm not — " His jaws came hard together for a second to steady a dangerous trembling. "Not the complete washout you all seem to think!" he finished with bitter vehemence as he turned away, mounted slowly with all the spirit and easy grace gone from his movements, and rode off toward the stables.

"Gosh, I hated to do that!" the Native Son muttered into Weary's ear as they rode back to the chutes, meeting the crowd that had somewhat tardily awakened to the fact that something not in the script was being enacted down there, and had started down to see what it was.

Weary did not answer. He was thinking of that last remark of the Kid's, wondering just what he had meant. Perhaps the key to the

whole sorry mess lay right there. Perhaps the Kid —

"You let him off easier than I would have done," Pink half reproved the Native Son, riding up alongside. "I'd have laid him out cold if he'd said to me what he said to you."

"Oh, kids of his age are always kind of goofy on some things. I can remember when I looked on a man past thirty as having one foot in the grave. He's learned something this morning he would never get in college — "

"Oh, sign off, you fellows!" snarled Weary, the sunny-tempered. "I'm getting darn sick of everybody romping on the Kid just because he lacks the outlook of us old roughnecks. I admit we're all qualified to double for the Almighty, but the Kid might be entitled to the same chance we took when we were his age of showing why the Lord should let us go on livin'. I don't want to hear any more about the Kid."

"All right, go pat him on the head and tell him he's a wonder!" snapped Pink, and galloped on ahead of the heavily burdened horse Weary and the Native Son bestrode.

Yet when Andy hailed him and asked what was the matter down there, Pink said noth-

ing much was the matter, but Luis called down the fellow that roped his bronk, and that was all.

Dulcie Harlan, sitting just above them with a pair of splendid opera glasses in her hand, opened her mouth in complete amazement while she stared wide-eyed at Pink. But she did not say a word, even when Boy declared that he bet that was the Kid down there, because the horse looked like Blazes.

She did not say anything, either, when the Little Doctor wondered aloud where Claude was that morning. She wanted to ask him, she said, whatever possessed him to tell such an outrageous story to the newspaper people. Among the badge-bedecked, big-hatted men loitering near her, Montana Kid seemed to share the honors equally with Luis Mendoza; the more heated arguments were about the Kid and his exploit with the bandit, his record in the arena, his affectation in the matter of shirts. A good many of the remarks that reached Dulcie's alert ears were distinctly unfriendly. The Kid's aloofness was not going unnoticed, she gathered. Some one suddenly raised his voice to declare, "That boy shore hates hisself, that's what I mean!" She also

heard sneering references to "them college champeens," and vague predictions that they'd be late for school if they had to walk back.

Presently, when it began to look as though the movie people were in for one of those long intervals when no one seems to be doing anything whatever, Miss Dulcie Harlan left her place of vantage and made her way thoughtfully to the office. Would Miss Gray please show her the list of contestants? There was a name she wanted to look up. She studied the list frowningly, giving especial attention to the events. Finally she placed her finger tip upon a certain name and laughed.

"If that isn't a synthetic flavor for you! Joella Germain! Did you get that, Miss Gray? I'll bet she spent days and days thinking that up. I noticed her trying to do her stuff — she's an awful mess, really. I don't see how she ever got in." She lifted her finger and studied the name again. "Joella Germain, Missoula, Montana," she read aloud. "It ought to be said on a saxophone. Just where is Missoula?"

Miss Gray confessed that she did not know, exactly; out on the plains somewhere, she thought.

"Not that it matters," said Dulcie, closing the book. "It's such a jazzy combination, and the girl is so terrible, one can't help noticing, is all."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE KID PLUMBS THE DEPTHS

So the incident passed and left scarcely a ripple on the surface, though the pebble of conscious reaction to it remained in the minds of many there. Probably no one person there was the object of so much conflicting thought and emotion as the Kid, though his name was not mentioned by any one save strangers. Weary's demand had closed the conversational door with a bang, so far as the Happy Family were concerned, and neither Chip nor the Little Doctor wanted to open it just then.

But none of these things reached the Kid just then. The Kid had slipped away from the boys and was lying full length in the loose hay, back where the light was dim. His face was hidden upon his folded arms and he was wrestling with that agony of shame which to the proud is worse than death; that terrible sense of defeat which a youth feels when he thinks himself hated where he would be

loved; spurned with contempt where he would be understood and appreciated for his purpose if not for its faulty realization.

The Happy Family had *not* changed. He knew it now beyond all possible doubt. That iron grasp of the Native Son's — he had felt it as inexorable as when he was twelve and Mig grabbed him and held him while he administered a playful paddling. Those two, Weary and Pink, bearing swiftly down upon them, getting the bronk between them with no fuss at all, not a false motion anywhere; the Native Son pulling his feet from the stirrups, throwing a limber leg over the rump of Weary's horse, twisting his slim body sidewise out of the saddle, sliding to the ground so easily — just as if he crawled off bronks every day of his life. The Kid was no fool. He knew a master when he saw one. They were his kind. They could still join, if they chose, the sport he loved with every fiber of his being. The way Mig had sat and cussed him out while that bay devil bucked — never giving a thought to the horse, it seemed, but thinking only of his anger.

His bunch; the same old boys he had worshiped all his life. Yesterday when he saw

them come riding down through the stable he had felt that it was so. But then they had merely looked the same as he remembered them. This was different. This was the bunch in action, the way they used to ride bronks at the Flying U, when the Kid was so little they were afraid to let him perch alone on the top rail of the corral; afraid he would fall off and get hurt. However busy they were, however excited, however hurried, some one of them always remembered to keep an eye on the Kid; always — always! He hadn't appreciated that watchfulness then. He had hated the way they plucked him back from danger. They thought he was just a baby and couldn't take care of himself. Now, he knew they had loved him. They hadn't said so. They were always bossing him around, threatening to paddle his pants, sending him to the house, yelling at him not to do this and for-gosh-sake to cut that out. But they had loved him.

Therein lay the tragedy of to-day. He had looked straight down into the Native Son's eyes and had read there — hate? The Kid in his misery believed so. A cold, malevolent hatred that had crimpled along the Kid's nerves like an electric shock. Even the humiliation

of being slapped in the face again and again — with Walt and Billy and Beck looking on! — was dwarfed beneath the cataclysmic conviction that they *hated* him. Weary and Pink had sat there on their horses and never spoke a word to him — but could he wonder at that? For what concerned one concerned them all. They had heard what he said to the Native Son; it was as if he had said it to them too. Mig had not even bothered to fight him like a man! Mig had just held him off and slapped him.

Well, the Kid knew he had deserved it. He did not try to fool himself there. He deserved to have them despise him. He had acted like a boob all along, thinking the Happy Family had changed or ever would change! He ought to have had more brains.

What he wanted to do — or what for a time he thought he wanted to do — was to take his horses and disappear with a baffling suddenness which would always remain an impenetrable mystery to all who knew him. He wanted to go so far not one of them would ever hear of him again. He thought longingly of South America or South Africa and wished there was some way of getting out of the sta-

dium unseen; getting out with the horses, that is. Impossible, of course, but he might leave a note, giving a horse to each one of the boys; Stardust to Walt — he could go on and finish the relay race, maybe —

A childish mood, perhaps. At any rate it passed and left him listlessly aware of his responsibility to his team, his obligation to his own manhood. Quit now, because the Native Son had slapped his jaw? The Kid involuntarily drew up one knee and kicked his leg straight again, physically repelling the thought. No, he'd go on. He couldn't betray his team — nor himself, for that matter. He couldn't let the Happy Family nod and say they knew all along he was a quitter.

The Kid sat up, staring gloomily at the gray wall beside him. Something began to nag at him; something he had said and forgotten when he plunged into the abyss. He was going to prove to them all that he wasn't a failure, a false alarm. It would mean going out there and facing that laughing, jeering multitude day after day — the Kid winced at the thought — but he'd have to do it. He would if he had any guts.

Walt and Billy and Beck, coming to find

him and get him on his fighting feet again, looked at one another shakenly when they saw the gray hardness of his face. Then Billy — who had been yell leader last year — jerked his head in a signal prepared five minutes before.

"Kid — *Ben*nett! *Rah! Rah! Rah!* Ki-id — *Ben*-nett! *R-r-rah!*"

To be sure, the rooters were only three, but they had good lungs and they burred the last rah beautifully, and not without effect.

"Ah, dry up!" growled the Kid. But he got up and brushed the hay off his breeches, and the light began to come back into his eyes. "Who said I was out?"

"Yes, we are collegiate!" bawled a raucous voice derisively, somewhere among the horses. "Do your crowin' now, you roosters — there won't be nothin' left but feathers when the finals are called!"

"Yah — now *I'll* tell one!" the Kid made spirited retort. "And listen, funny-lookin', I'll tell it at the finals. Try and be there — it'll be good!"

"Attaboy!" Walt grinned. "We're just gettin' started, and there's nothin' on earth can stop us. Eh, Kid?"

"Say, you'll bust the buttons off them blue shirts if yuh pooch yourselves out any more," yelled the unseen humorist. "Mail order champeens! Six-bits per dozen! Comes in blue — and yella!"

"Yes, they told us the yellow was out of stock — they said a bunch of you guys had the yellow, and were saving it for the finals," said the Kid, peering here and there to see who the fellow was.

The reply to that was chiefly prophetic of dire failure for all college men, but there was so great a percentage of conventional and uninteresting profanity in the remarks that the Kid merely shrugged his shoulders and yielded to Walt's importunities that they go and eat.

A lunch wagon parked beside the south gate where the Kid had first entered the place lured them with its white immaculateness. They lunched satisfyingly on bread and milk with the cream showing thick and yellow in the top of the bottles when they were set before them. The Kid's mood swung back to normal. He could discuss plans again with the boys, add his hopeful guess to their optimistic estimates of the money they would win

that day. He could even forget for moments at a time the humiliations of the morning and his dread of being stared at by strangers. They must wear their blue shirts, regardless of the attention they would attract. He saw that now. Walt was right; they couldn't afford to let any one turn them off the trail they had chosen to travel. They were the first small beginning of a pioneer contest team. If they weakened in one detail they might as well throw up the whole thing and quit.

So they returned to quarters and dressed in their blaring best, with freshly shaven faces, freshly brushed hats, freshly polished riding boots. Because they caught disparaging phrases as they passed lounging groups of riders, they walked with a slight swagger as if to say to this small, tense world that they knew they were good — they admitted it.

It was the kind of influence the Kid needed to stiffen his pride and his determination to win in spite of everything, but when he went to saddle Blazes for the grand entry he found a twist of paper tucked under the halter buckle where he could not fail to discover it. His fingers fumbled a little with eagerness to see what it was, and if he told you he didn't feel

his heart jump in his chest he would not be telling the truth, that's all. He turned his back upon possible spying and unwound the rumpled twist. And this is what was written:

Don't let them get your goat — go on and show them you've got the stuff.

It was a girl's writing, of course. No man would go that way about it. A man could walk up and clap him on the shoulder and say it. The Kid studied the pencilled scribble, his lip between his teeth. Who was it? Joella Germain? She seemed to like him quite a lot. Some one of the other cowgirls who flung him a smile or a word as they went hurrying here and there on errands of vast importance? But most of them were married and bore themselves circumspectly as young matrons should, whether they were in chaps or silks.

If it had been some dirty dig — a slap of sarcasm, he thought, he'd know it was that darn Dulcie Harlan. The writing looked about like her. But she'd never go out of her way to cheer a fellow up; not so you could notice it! Must be Joella. Nice little thing — Joella.

But the Kid did not thrill to the thought. He came near tearing the note up and scat-

tering it amongst the bedding, but he folded into as small a compass as he could and buttoned it into his shirt pocket instead. Joella, of course. Nice kid, Joella. But somehow he still didn't thrill to the thought of her friendliness.

He ought to find her and thank her; let her know he had got the note all right and was grateful for her good-fellowship. He could hunt her up before the grand entry got under way. That much was due her as a matter of courtesy. But he didn't make any attempt to find her, and when he did see her riding out to take her place in the parade he did not hurry to overtake her. After all, maybe she didn't write it. Maybe — The Kid did not attempt to finish the conjecture.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SCRAPS OF PAPER HELP

THAT day, by sheer dogged determination, the Kid ran first again in the relay race; first, because his horses behaved perfectly in station; first, because they never failed to turn in and stop abruptly in one or two stiff-legged jumps; first, because the Kid timed his saddle change and remounting to the fraction of a second and, with such horses, never varied. But it was a close shave, at that. The fellow with the black and the pinto came in second, his horses a shade faster than the Kid's but nervous in station and not so accurate in turning in. They ran by a little. They tried to lunge away when the saddle was flung on their backs. Not much — better than most of the others, but enough. Beck, with nothing to do during the relay but watch and pray, told the boys in detail exactly how each string performed.

"It's clockwork, the way you ride, Kid,"

he said. "Folks are beginning to talk about it. Boobs that don't know anything about riding. They can see how slick you handle it. Don't you let that clock run down, what I mean. One bobble, and that Oklahoma boy has got you stopped."

"Barring accidents — some horse bumping me, maybe — there isn't going to be any bobble," said the Kid. "I know what I'm up against."

"No, you don't," Beck contradicted. "You keep your eye peeled for Slim Adley; fellow with the gray and the sorrel. He's not in the money, so far; just running on a gamble some of you'll have bad luck. He's a dirty rider, Kid. Crowds 'em when he doesn't need to. And he's thick with Carlos Baird — that fast guy. I wouldn't put it past 'em to frame you."

"I'm watching them all," the Kid assured him. "If they get close, I do. The ponies are wise too. No horse is going to do any shoving far as they're concerned. You notice how they duck in, don't you?"

"Yes, it's clockwork — and you keep that clock running on time, Kid!"

The Kid nodded, well pleased with the excellent teamwork his boys were showing.

When one was contesting, the others were watching out for his interests, ready to give advice or warning if they thought it was needed. It seemed to him a splendid idea to pool their interests. His faith in the team idea grew apace. It ought to work. It would work.

That second day bore him out in his belief, for among the four they managed to get "in the money" in every event they entered. The Kid won a hundred dollars with his rope and Blazes, and got second money on his bronk riding. Walt won third. In the steer wrestling he stood first for the two performances. Billy and Beck came trailing in behind, but they had something to show for their day's work and they were correspondingly jubilant.

The Kid still held a large share of the crowd's attention, and that he tried to ignore. The judges watched him closer than they did some of the others, it seemed to him — and that put him on his mettle, keyed him up to make no slip. Everybody watched him. He felt as if he were performing under a microscope. They knew him by name — by his contest name, that is — and when he rode out to rope or to ride they yelled at him and told him, some of them, to keep his shirt on. The

Kid hated the notoriety, but he refused to be distracted. His year on the Varsity football team helped him now. But he hated it just the same, and perversely wished that the crowd would stay at home if they couldn't keep their mouths shut.

The next day was much like the second; and the next and the next. The grind began to tell on men and horses alike. Day after day the colorful grand entry, flags swaying at the head of the column, rodeo pennants whipping in the breeze, the amplifiers sending "The Stars and Stripes Forever" blaring in from all sides of the great stadium until the air vibrated with the martial strains and pulses leaped in response. Day after day the ranks of the contestants thinned; a man hurt and carried away in the black ambulance that stood always waiting just under cover of the eastern tunnel, like a trapdoor spider peering out from its retreat, waiting and watching for the unwary fly; a man disqualified for breaking the rules, which were stringent and rigidly enforced. Was it not a world's championship contest? None but the fittest might survive the test of skill, courage, endurance.

A relay horse bolted across the field, *threw*

his rider, and came galloping wildly back on the track in the wrong direction, menacing the other riders. They dodged him and went on, changed horses and must dodge those who were frantically pursuing the riderless animal. But the race went on. The Kid's "clock" continued to tick off the seconds with beautiful precision, still in the lead from sheer skill in riding. Dropping the trick roping helped, of course. The pace would have been too terrific otherwise. Stardust had a little more speed, it seemed to him. He needed it too.

Relay—calf roping—bronk riding—trick riding, with an interval of rest between. The Kid worked as if he were under a coach. The moment the judges passed upon his work, he headed straight for the stables and threw himself down in the hay for a few minutes of complete relaxation and rest. The other boys did the same, by his orders. Other contestants might fool around the chutes, or pile into a cab and go hunting excitement up town between shows — the blue shirts returned to quarters and stayed there. It was a grind. They missed a lot of fun. They made no friendships, they drew upon themselves an increasing amount of ridicule poisoned with dislike.

But they were keeping themselves "in the money." First, second, third — the judges learned to know those blue shirts, learned to watch them with the appraising eyes of men who recognized championship material when they saw it.

Day after day, night after night, this man dropping out, that man forging ahead, some poor fellow taking the ambulance ride into the tunnel.

The Kid's fingers learned to feel carefully in Stardust's halter buckle, for the twisted note, unsigned, noncommittal, mysterious, faintly mocking but always stimulating as a glass of rare old wine.

"We want a touchdown!"

That did not sound like Joella Germain, just at first. But then the Kid remembered that Joella had a brother in the University of Idaho, and probably was ardently interested in sports. Come to think of it, he knew she was. Shy kid, Joella. When he saw her and talked with her during the trick riding she never so much as hinted at her little campaign of encouragement. Blushed, though, when the Kid told her he certainly appreciated her way of keeping a fellow on his toes to win.

"I — I want you to be a champion," she said once. "I'm sorry you gave up the roping, but I can see it was too much, coming right ahead of the relay." But she wouldn't give him any satisfaction about the notes.

"Stay with it, you've got the stuff," said another.

The Kid saved them all. Sometimes he unfolded and read them between performances, studying the compact, vertical handwriting, as he lay in his own little retreat behind a pile of hay bales, where he went to be by himself when he was more tired than usual. Sometimes the boys came and sat down in a close huddle or sprawled on their stomachs to take a nap. But they never saw the notes or knew that the Kid received them.

Boy had apparently fallen under the spell of grease paint and camera — which was not surprising — for he dogged the footsteps of the Happy Family and the Kid seldom saw him save at a distance and in the company of those who were as strangers to him. The defection would have hurt him more if he had not concentrated so completely each day upon winning that other things were pushed into the background of his mind. Still, it was an-

other pin prick to his pride, another reason why he avoided every one save his loyal team.

Then came an afternoon when Stardust and Sunup ran sluggishly and the Kid dropped to second place. It was inexplicable. They seemed to be perfectly well, though they lacked the sharp appetite after the performance that had heretofore manifested itself in pawing and nickering when he rattled the oats basin. The Kid could not understand it. He brought the veterinary, who looked them over carefully and said they were in perfect form and there was no reason in the world why they shouldn't go on and do their best. There weren't a healthier pair of horses in the entire outfit, he declared.

The team was puzzled and worried. A hundred dollars each day they had been counting on from the relay, with the final prize of cash and cup and the championship in sight. But their spirits rose that evening when the Kid nosed under the wire a half-length ahead of the pinto, and took second money for the day. His calf roping was speedier that night because of the load lifted from his mind. And the work of the other boys speeded up also. Beck got first money in steer wrestling, Walt

second. The blue shirts were more than holding their own.

But the next afternoon, which was the fifth day of the rodeo, the Kid got a real shock. It was the note which his fingers sought and found in Stardust's halter buckle. The Kid read it twice before the full significance struck him and left him dazed, incredulous and oddly thrilled. Yet it was brief as the others had been, almost.

Do you always stuff your horses with oats just before the relay? It's horribly brutal to make the poor things run on a full tummy.

Oats! He looked into the feed box and found it moist from the licking lips of Stardust, with wet grains in the corners where they had eluded him. Sunup's oats box held the same betraying signs. Some one had slipped the horses a big feed of oats while he was out in the grand entry parade. Simple — simple and effective; no horse would run his best just after a feeding.

But it was not that which thrilled the Kid to his toes and set his pulse beating erratically. It was the wording of the note. Now he knew! There was only one girl in the world who would write like that. The little devil! The

darned little innocent-eyed devil! Why — why —

The Kid's thoughts raced round and round, without lucid beginning or a logical end. She'd been spoofing him from the very first — Pretending to know nothing about horses — ! All that cruelty talk — Not interested, hunh? — Little devil! Put one over on him —

One thing he did, however, which showed sense. Blazes and Sunup looked a good deal alike, and Blazes was fast. He told Walt and Billy about the oats, and said he was going to use Blazes in the relay. He'd just switch those two, and rope with Sunup, maybe. Anyway, Blazes would have to run, that day.

So he had one horse that day to offset the handicap some one had placed upon him, and because the fast string made trouble in the station for Carlos Baird, the Kid broke even on the race. After that they managed to keep an eye on the horses.

One other thing the Kid did, though he waited until the next day to do it. He rode out for grand entry as before, leaving Billy on guard in the stable with careful orders to watch the grain supply. But before the Kid

went, he twisted a small piece of paper under Stardust's halter buckle. His fraternity pin was securely pinned inside, and underneath he carefully printed three words:

"S. A. E. Such Assistance Enchants."

When he went eagerly to Stardust's head after the parade, the paper was gone and the buckle was empty.

"Anybody been here, Billy?" the Kid questioned sharply.

"Nope," Billy told him without meeting his eyes. "A fellow came through just after the band started playing the grand march, but when he saw me he kept right on going. Pretty soon he came back, but he never stopped and he never looked my way. The ponies are okay, Kid. You can bank on that."

The Kid looked at him, nodded and turned away without asking if a girl had also walked that way, petting the horses as she passed. No, he couldn't ask that. Billy would wonder whom the Kid was expecting.

So once more the Kid was in a mental turmoil. Had she got it, all right? He pretended to drop something and searched the bedding of the stall unavailingly. She must have got

the note. But why hadn't she left one? The little imp, didn't she know he had her tagged? That pin ought to tell her — If that wasn't just like a girl — leave a fellow in hot water — Darn her, anyway! If she thought he was going to hunt her up she was sad-lee mistaken!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TROUBLES MULTIPLY

SIX days of the rodeo — which meant twelve grilling contests — and the Kid was still first place in the relay, second in calf roping, third in bronk riding, doing his trick riding with beautiful precision and ease. The other boys were holding their own and a little better, and the seasoned contestants were watching them sourly, most of them. Former champions were being winnowed out with alarming rapidity, though not from lack of skill.

"Too many wild parties after the night shows," the Kid diagnosed their troubles succinctly. "The darned saps; they must know they can't hit 'er up all night and get out next day and make any kind of showing. We'll make it, boys. We're going as strong now as we were the second day, and that's because we're taking care of ourselves. You can't get away from it — training shows."

"Well," gloomed Beck, "it oughta show. I wish to heck it could show us a decent meal or a good movie show once in awhile. All the zip there is in this town — and I haven't so much as crawled to the top of one of those two-story busses! If this was old Rome and we were the lions let out every day in the arena to eat a Christian or two and then prodded back to our pens, we'd be having just as hot a time as we are now. I can't say as I blame the boys that step out and see the sights once in awhile."

"Same here," Billy sighed, peppering his eggs until they were black. "If a hen cackles within a mile of me, after this, I know I shall scream."

"Only two more days after this one," the Kid tried to hearten them. "Look at our record, boys! We aren't eating gravel, anyway; that's what some of the old champs have done, and there was no reason on earth for them to cave in like they did to-day. If they'd — "

"Oh, yes! If they'd gone straight to bed, and had their nice mush for breakfast and their nice toast and eggs and one vegetable, maybe — Say, I wouldn't put in another nine days like this for all the cups and belts in the country! It's fine to be a champ, maybe, but it's a

darn sight finer to get a little pleasure outa life. Look at me! If I was to break my neck to-day, what have I got outa this last week? Why, I don't know for a fact whether the Loop is a rope or a scenic railway!" Beck pushed back his plate with a gesture of disgust and stood up. "Training rules be damned!" he exclaimed. "There's a bunch going to the Bullpen for a beefsteak supper after the show to-night, and to Rainbow Gardens after that. I'm going along. Team or no team, I'm human!"

"So am I," Billy declared, leaving his highly seasoned dish of boiled eggs to follow Beck's lead. "Better come along, you fellows. It's not going to ruin anybody's life to have one evening off. Let's all go!"

The Kid finished his glass of milk and paid for the four dinners before he made any reply. He turned afterwards and looked out into the street, where flowed a steady, changing river of automobiles hurrying all in one direction — up town where the great electric signs were already winking dimly in the dusk.

"Think you'll lay down your steer in seventeen seconds to-morrow, Beck, as you did this afternoon?" he asked quietly, when an impa-

tient movement beside him recalled him to the present.

"Oh, damn the steers! I can down one quicker with a knife and fork," flashed Beck.

"If you go," said the Kid, "don't wear those shirts."

"Fired off the team, if we go?" Billy asked truculently.

"Darn right! You know that — or you ought to know it."

"Suits me," said Beck stubbornly. "I'm getting fed up, anyway. Too damn many rules. Too damn much hiding out in the dark. I'm growing blue mold on my hide from living in that burrow."

"Same here," cried Billy, not realizing he was Beck's tame echo.

"How about you, Walt?" The Kid swung about, his eyes boring into Walt's face. (Eyes startlingly like Chip's when he was angry, had he only known it.)

"Don't be a boob," growled Walt.

The Kid looked at him and drew a long breath before he turned to the rebels.

"Go get into other shirts then," he snapped. "You're off the team right now and you can't wear team colors. Once you get those shirts

off your backs you can go to the devil for all I care. Come on, Walt."

While the two stared after him, palpably regretting already their insurrection, the Kid stalked off and disappeared within the stadium, Walt striding along beside him.

"The West," said Beck finally, "was tamed on meat. You've got to show me where the old trail bosses lived on mush and milk."

"Injun fighting," Billy averred, "was mostly done with good old beefsteaks tucked under their belts." Which was all right for an argument, of course, though it lacked authenticity.

"Well, come on, Bill. Let's go shuck these shirts and get us a square meal. We've got time enough before the show." Beck headed for the gate. "Pie!" he exclaimed ecstatically. "Planked tenderloin and French fried and biscuits — no, waffles and honey — oh, boy!"

"I'm not going to help him in the relay, either," Billy declared, as they made their way to where their suitcases were stowed. "Darned if I will. He can't get hard-boiled with *me.*"

At that very moment Walt was asking the Kid what he was going to do for a second man

at the station, and the Kid was telling him he'd do without.

"I'm going to cut out the grand entry too," the Kid went on, planning swiftly, "and I'll sleep with the horses. We can't stand guard the way we've been doing, of course. Maybe I can get Boy to stay with — no, there's Shorty, crippled so he can't ride. I'll hire him to keep an eye on them when we're not around. We'll make out all right, Walt. It's those two boobs that'll suffer."

But the desertion was another stab at his pride, another blow upon a mighty sore spot. It seemed to the Kid that everything he cared for was being snatched from him by untoward circumstance. His quarrel with his folks, further embittered here at the rodeo; the utter estrangement of the Happy Family, and now the disruption of his contest team upon which he had lavished so much time and thought, so many hopes. Even Joella Germain, who had shown a flattering admiration for him that had salved his self-esteem when it had suffered the most, had deliberately turned from him that afternoon to talk and laugh with a trick rider from Texas. He hadn't cared at the time, but now the defection recurred to him as one more

instance of how he was being flouted by his friends.

Not a word from his mother, not a sign from his dad; even J. G. had not been near him nor sent any message of good will. Boy never showed up any more. It did not occur to him that he had deliberately kept out of the way of every one when he was not actually in the arena, and that Boy — and any of the others for that matter — would have small chance of finding him, or that it was more than probable that some of them had tried and failed. The boys wouldn't have told where he was, that was certain. Even the little twisted notes had ceased. He resented that too, and did not attempt to understand why. She had got his pin — she could count coup, and that was all she had wanted, very likely.

It was a glowering Montana Kid who went into the contest that night. Tight-lipped he rode and gave no quarter. Frowning he went out and roped his calf, tied it down and threw up his hands within nineteen seconds of his start; let it go and mounted amid cheering that could not smooth the scowl from his forehead. They were careless strangers who cheered and clapped. He had no friends.

Billy and Beck, carefully avoiding his immediate vicinity, went out when their names were called and did whatever was required of them, and told each other between while that they couldn't see where they were any the worse because they had eaten what they pleased. They wanted to tell the Kid that, but didn't, chiefly because he would not give them a chance.

On this night the Kid did not return to the stable to rest between his contests. He did not want to lie there alone with his unhappiness. He remained by the chutes instead, among a group of men who had plenty to say to one another but little to say to him. He did not know that he was wearing all of his aloofness in his look and manner that night and that men glanced at him and looked again curiously, wondering what was wrong with Montana Kid. They wondered, too, what disruption had occurred in the college team, but they were not at all tempted to ask the Kid about it.

"Here y'are, Cowboy — you've drawed a dinger, shore 'nuff!" a kindly voice recalled the Kid to himself.

He had been moodily watching Billy Perry

pick himself up after a vile-tempered gray had sent him spread-eagling. Billy was probably wishing he had stuck to his simple diet, the Kid told himself, wondering how it felt to fall that hard on a stomach too full of pie. Billy came stiffly back to the fence, shying off when he saw the Kid standing there.

"Mon-tana Kid, riding Wilcie — outa chute Number Six!" cried the announcer, after Walt had ridden a crooked jumper straight and came back, grinning maliciously at the sulky Billy. Walt felt that he could afford to grin, since he was pretty sure he was in the day money. Now if the Kid got a good one, they could crow over Billy and Beck.

"Look out for this one — he's a fence peeler," a slim young fellow warned the Kid as he settled himself in the saddle.

"Thanks," said the Kid, flashing the other a surprised smile — the first time his lips had relaxed since supper.

Just at first, the caution seemed needless, for Wilcie gave a leap that carried him a full length out away from the gate. He stopped there, shook his head while the Kid's muffled spurs raked him teasingly from shoulder to thigh. Suddenly he stood up — and up — the

Kid thought he was going over backwards and leaned, ready to jump as the horse went down. But Wilcie had other plans.

He felt the Kid loosen himself in the saddle, felt his balance shift, on guard against being crushed under the horse when he struck the ground. Then with a mighty heave of his sleek body the horse pivoted on his heels, gave a long jump and was bucking broadside to chute Number Seven, scraping the heavy plank gate with shoulder and hip.

The Kid swung in his right heel and fairly lifted the murderous brute away from the gate with the jab he gave. Wilcie gave a forward lunge as he swung off and the Kid felt a sickening blow upon his knee and thigh where he raked the post as he went by. For a minute he thought he was gone. The arena whirled drunkenly before him and he had a strange illusion of not being in the saddle at all. But the horse gave another lunge and the Kid's head cleared, his intuitive sense of balance returned. His right leg felt numb and limp. When he tried to swing it forward and back, spurring according to the rules, it seemed to him that all power was gone, all volition. Then, because the horse seemed bent on re-

peating the trick, the whistle blew and two riders galloped up on either side. The Kid slipped off, putting his weight upon his sound left leg.

He was close to the gate alongside chute Number Ten. The horse had not at any time been more than a few rods away from the chutes. One of the judges rode up and asked if the Kid was hurt.

"Not to amount to anything," said the Kid, though beads of moisture not caused by the exercise stood on his forehead and lips. The judge looked doubtful when the Kid hopped to the fence and leaned against it with tightly closed eyes and fingers clutching at the stout wire mesh.

"Your knee? Better have it looked after."

The Kid shook his head, opening his eyes to look at the big Texan.

"Thanks, no. Got my funny bone for a minute, is all. It's all right. Skinned a little, maybe, but nothing to hurt." The Kid managed to grin, though not very convincingly.

The judge looked sceptical and rode off as the announcer called the name of another rider coming out of chute Number One. Walt came up and took the Kid's arm over his

shoulder, helping him through the gate and on to where Blazes was tied, back out of the way. The Kid was in the saddle when Tex came looking for him.

"What's the matter, Kid? Get hurt?"

"No," lied the Kid. "Knocked my knee a little — hit my crazy bone, and it sure sung for a few minutes; but it's all right, Tex — thanks just the same."

"Won't cost you a cent to ride over to the Red Cross station — you know where it is, on around here — and have it looked at. Better do that, Kid."

"I would, Tex, if it was necessary. Thanks." Then, because Tex was still looking at him rather intently, the Kid laughed. "I guess that fence-peeler managed to peel about sixty dollars off my day money, darn him," he said.

"I don't know," Tex answered, still regarding him. "You made a good ride, Kid. That damn horse is going to kill somebody yet. I think I'll take him out. You did all right, far as I could see. I'm not one of the judges, though. Just keep on the way you're going, Kid, and — " He turned and called to a man who passed, hurrying to overtake him. Perhaps he did not want to express himself fur-

ther to the Kid, anyway. A rodeo manager must be a past master in diplomacy and never show favoritism. He did not tell the Kid that Chip had sent him to see if the Kid was hurt, or that the Little Doctor had nearly fainted when Wilcie crashed into the fence. He did not feel that it was his place to butt into family affairs.

"How about it, Kid?" Walt demanded when Tex was gone. "How bad did he get you — on the square?"

"Not fatal, Walt. I'll be all right. You stay here and kinda keep an eye on the boys. I'll go back and get ready for the trick riding."

"Well — all right," Walt assented, but like Tex he eyed the Kid dubiously. A man might say what he pleased, but he didn't have that look in his face for nothing. The Kid was suffering, any man with eyes in his head could see that. Yet he rode off whistling — something he hadn't done at all through the whole week. Walt watched him out of sight with a feeling of helplessness, and snarled savagely at Billy and Beck when they met at the chutes for the steer wrestling, just to relieve his nerves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WHAT'S A CHAMPION ANYWAY?

WITH two events — the cowgirls' relay race and the steer wrestling — following the bronk riding, the Kid did not feel that he must hurry his preparations for the trick riding; yet he had no time to-night for that relaxation which had sent him out rested and with renewed energy for the ordeal. To-night he turned Blazes into his stall and went to his own particular nest in the hay where his bed was rolled and his suitcases were tucked out of sight. He went hopping on one foot, his teeth gritted, his breath hissing between them.

In one of the suitcases he had a few simple first-aid articles for use on the trail; bandages, iodine, a bland, soothing salve, liniment and the like. He had been thinking mostly of the horses when he bought the stuff, but now he wondered if some guiding intelligence had directed the purchase for this particular need. He did not want to go to the Red Cross sta-

tion and be pawed over and his name recorded, and his hurt. The news would be sure to spread, and although the Kid had only the haziest conception of the power of thought, he shunned the idea of having every one talking about him and watching to see if he could go through.

His leg was not broken, he felt sure of that. Something had gone wrong with his knee. A bad bruise, probably. It hurt like the very devil, but not enough to stop him at this stage of the game. When he bared his leg and saw how the knee was puffed, however a thin edge of doubt crept insidiously into his resolute optimism concerning it. Looked bad, he had to admit it; but he did not admit that it looked bad enough to put him out of the contest.

So he massaged it with gentle finger tips which he could scarcely bear upon the hurt, poured on a liniment warranted not to blister, and used a whole roll of three-inch bandage upon it; though that, too, he could scarcely bear. But afterwards, when he essayed walking he found that the bandage helped him to set his weight on that foot. Yes, he could manage the contest, he was sure. Maybe a night's

rest and more liniment in the morning would reduce the swelling and he'd be all right. He'd have to cut out some of his best stuff in the trick riding to-night, though. He didn't feel as if he could manage that two-way jump, clean over Stardust and back again; no, just the thought of that made him wince. But he could do the crawl, he guessed, and he could stand on his head all right, and do the pivot in the saddle — he'd fill in with that; turning round and round, facing backward and then forward.

And, with that stubborn determination which, if it is born of strength instead of overweening conceit, can rise to the sublimity of high courage, he did manage a very creditable performance that night. The Happy Family, watching him without comment, knew that the bronk had not slammed him into the fence without effect, but even they did not guess the truth. Chip wondered when that darned kid was ever going to play himself out; twice a day for six days was going it pretty strong, and it seemed to him that the kid wasn't holding up any too well. The Little Doctor felt a poignant relief because Claude didn't seem to have been hurt after all. And as for Dulcie

Harlan, who can guess accurately what is passing in the mind of a girl with eyes like hers? The Old Man had remained at the hotel, one show a day being as much as he could stand, so he did not know anything about it.

"Slowed you down, didn't it, Kid?" Walt commented after the performance. "You go to bed and I'll look after the ponies. How's your leg, honest?"

"Black and blue, feels like," the Kid replied casually and with a diction his English professor would have railed at. "All right, Walt, you keep an eye on the horses, will you? I want to keep off my darned leg all I can."

Then Billy and Beck marched in and got their grips, loftily informing Walt and the Kid that they had a swell room up town. The total disruption of the team was to Walt a tragedy which dwarfed mere bruises to insignificance. The Kid's stiff-legged hobble did not seem as serious as it would otherwise have done.

How he ever rode the relay race next day, the Kid could not afterwards have told. His knee had throbbed all night and the hours had passed in a half-waking nightmare. But

he rode the race, and by sheer pluck in the resaddling he came in second. Even Walt never knew what it cost him.

The calf roping he missed altogether. He knew that his painful hobbling from horse to calf would merely drag out the time and advertise his hurt. He didn't want that. Once the crowd knew he was crippled, he might as well quit. And he didn't want his mother to worry; Dad and the rest of them would say it served him right, but his mother always worried so if the least little thing got the matter with him. So he failed to appear when his name was called for the calf roping, and that, of course, automatically disqualified him. Too bad, but he couldn't help it — and anyway, he had won quite a nice little bunch of money from day to day with his rope. It was not a dead loss.

How he ever managed the bronk riding he did not know. It had been straight hell. But the horse he drew was a "straight pitcher" and not so hard to ride as he looked. When the whistle blew and the helpers rode in, the Kid eased over behind one of the riders and so rode back to the chutes, which was his privilege.

Then he had more than half an hour before the trick riding, and he went through it. He was down to three stunts now, for he couldn't manage the crawl, and he couldn't stand on his head. He didn't dare. He was afraid he would get so dizzy he'd fall off, which would disgrace him before the multitude.

As it was, the multitude wagged their heads and said Montana Kid was drunk. The blue shirts were letting themselves go, and it was a shame when they had done so well. And this seemed to be the truth, for Billy and Beck, having broken training, went the limit and betrayed their condition beyond all doubt.

That night they were at least sober, and their work was better. But Montana Kid — so said the wise ones — was so drunk he could hardly get on his horses in the relay race. He came trailing in third, and he wouldn't have done that well if Stardust and Sunup had not laid back their ears and given all that was in them — because horses have their pride too, and these were not accustomed to see themselves running in the dust of their rivals. It would not have been so bad, perhaps, if the gossip had not gone on within hearing of that box where Montana Kid was something more

than a picturesque name. The Little Doctor heard, and turned to glare at the traducers; but afterward she watched the Kid worriedly. Was it possible that Claude had fallen in with a bad crowd and was drinking? She saw Billy Perry go staggering to the fence after a steer had piled him in the second jump — Billy and Beck persisted in wearing their blue shirts, so there was no mistaking them. She did not see her Claude stagger, because she did not see him on the ground, but he certainly was not acting like himself. And beside her Dulcie Harlan was staring with wide, hard eyes and her hands clenched together in her lap. Chip did not say a word, but his face was dark and somber. It was a silent party in the box that night, and afterward in the taxi the Little Doctor and Chip came nearer quarreling than they had in many a day, because she thought Chip ought to talk to Claude and Chip flatly refused to do it. Let the young whelp learn by experience; it was the only way he ever would learn, since no one could tell him anything. The Little Doctor cried herself to sleep that night, and Chip lay for hours awake, staring miserably at the reflection of the street lamps which shone on the wall,

wondering what a father should do or could do with a boy as unruly as the Kid. His instinct was to wait; to give him more rope and let him have his fling. But that was pretty hard on Dell, he thought. He'd talk it over with the boys. Maybe they'd know what to do.

That night the Kid lay feverishly awake, his mind shuttling back and forth over the different events next day, and how best he could get through them without making an awful flop. His leg was swollen so much that he had twice been compelled to loosen the bandage. His knee had disappeared altogether beneath a great discolored cushion of distended tissue. Walt could no longer be kept in ignorance of his condition, and he waited on him and worried over him until he might almost as well have been crippled himself, his anguish was so real.

"It's a darned, rotten shame!" he said over and over. "Let me ride relay to-morrow, Kid. You've got the right to put in a substitute if you're hurt, you know. I'll go tell Tex — "

"The stuff's off between us, Walt, if you do," the Kid threatened with a note of hysteria in his voice. "I can go through with it

all right. You keep your mouth shut to Tex."

"Can I bring you anything, Kid? Some coffee and a sandwich?"

"No. Bottle of milk — and aspirin. Scads of aspirin. And water, Walt. Couldn't you get hold of a bucket and fill it with ice water without having it spread all over the front page of the papers?"

"There's no damn sense in killing yourself, Kid! I can get in the relay, and you can let the rest go. Hell, it's no disgrace to be hurt, you big sap!"

"Aw, can it, Walt! Go get me that stuff and shut up. I'm — I'll be all right to-morrow."

So, while his distressed parents pictured the Kid as one of many carousing, drinking, dancing the night away, he lay on his rumpled blankets in the hay and endured the agony of that injured knee, and planned feverishly how he would dismount just so, in the station, and not touch that foot to the ground at all. He could manage, all right, if Walt held his horse just so. And he wouldn't try to use his right stirrup at all. He wouldn't need to. He'd take a lot of aspirin to deaden the pain, and he'd make it. Only two more rides and he'd be through.

The bronk riding — well, of course he could take his time about getting on — let himself down easy into the saddle, so it wouldn't hurt his leg. Maybe he wouldn't draw a very salty one. If his luck only held, in that one point, he'd maybe put it over all right. He could stand anything for a minute or two, if he set himself to stand it. They couldn't call him a quitter, anyway!

That was the burden of his weary, half-delirious thought: He wouldn't be called a quitter. His dad couldn't have that to throw at him, anyway. Nor the Native Son. He'd show them he just couldn't be whipped! (He was a fool, of course; but with something splendid in his foolishness for all that.)

Groggy with sedatives, glassy-eyed with fever, his face red and looking somehow bloated and yet haggard, he rode out to the relay next day and even his mother had the sickening conviction that her son was two-thirds drunk. And she a doctor too! He reeled a bit in the saddle when he reined Stardust around for the start. The crowd laughed and made wise remarks, some of which he might easily have heard if his ears had not roared so.

Yet he rode that race. Walt was seen to

steady him when he rolled off at the station between laps, and the judges fined him ten seconds for that breach of the rules. But the Kid did not know or care. He was staying with it — he wasn't quitting.

How he got back into the stables he did not know, but it seemed to him in a vague sort of way that men stepped back hastily out of his way, looking at him strangely. He remembered looking at the box where his folks sat — oh, he always knew they were there watching every move he made! — and taking off his hat to give them an elaborate and mocking salute. He knew that when he bowed to them he somehow lost his balance and was going right on down, when some one grabbed him and pushed him upright in the saddle. He had trouble then getting his hat to stay on. It had kept slipping off — and why shouldn't it, when his head was big as a barrel? He heard the crowd laughing at something, but he didn't know they were laughing at him, because he was so amusingly "lit up."

"You damn fool, you've got to go to the hospital with that leg!" cried Walt, almost in tears over him. "I'm going to tell Tex! If you go out there to climb a bronk, I'll — "

"You'll stick along and see me through," the Kid said grimly, opening his eyes that looked perfectly black as he stared fixedly at the other's face. "I'm all right, Walt. I made it, didn't I? This is the finals, man! I can't quit now—*I'm not going to quit!* Get that—and get it right. Hand me that aspirin."

Out in the arena the calf roping had begun. *"Walter Myers!"* boomed the amplifiers. *"Wal-ter My-ers!"* There was a wait and then, "Not present! *Al Gilette,* the next *roper!"* And so Walt was disqualified while he knelt in the hay beside the Kid and swore and pleaded by turns.

Dimly they heard the laughing and shouting that always accompanied the Indian squaw race.

"Bronk riding's next," the Kid said with slurred syllables and an eager intensity in his voice. "Help me on my horse, Walt—we gotta get over there."

"You can't!" wailed Walt. "Have some sense, Kid!"

"Damn you," gritted the Kid, "you do as I say!"

So Walt led Blazes over beside the Kid,

helped him pull on his bat-winged, silver-trimmed chaps, buckled them for him because the Kid's fingers fumbled so, and put on his spurs.

"You can't do it!" muttered Walt, and steadied the Kid and half lifted him into the saddle.

"Shut your croaking!" mumbled the Kid. "Give me some aspirin!"

"You'll kill yourself with that dope!"

"Aw, dry up! Where's Billy and Beck? Tell 'em to hurry; we're late as it is."

Walt gave him a startled look and made a sound in his throat as if he were choking back a sob, but he didn't say anything. He just walked close alongside the Kid with his hand on the Kid's well leg, ready to catch him if he fell.

"Mon-tana Kid, riding Overall Bill — outa chute Number One! Montana Kid, folks, riding Overall Bill outa chute Number One!"

"Say, that guy's spifflicated!" one of the men at the chutes told his companion. "*He* can't ride."

"Let 'im take a spill, then!" The other laughed expectantly. "Do 'im good. I knowed

he wouldn't last through the finals. All them rah-rahs is layin' down, yuh notice."

"Okay!" shouted the Kid deliriously. "Throw wide the pearly gates — I'm going to flew!"

So they laughed and opened the gate. And Overall Bill, a big brown who was a fighter from nose to wicked heels, lunged out with a high, crooked jump and a kick for good measure. Dead silence, then a prolonged "O-o-oh!" like a groan. Overall Bill took a final kick at the limp figure on the ground and went careening down toward the gate by the Indian camp, kicking at the saddle as he went.

"Sit still, Dell!" Chip commanded sternly, over in the press box. "He had a fall coming to him. Gee whiz, do you think he's the first fellow to be piled?"

"Oh, I know, but — but he isn't getting up! He — oh, let me out! *Let me out,* I tell you! He's hurt!"

Over there by Chute Number One, men were bending over the Kid. Other men were running to the spot. The black ambulance came shrieking through the gate and over to the place.

In the press box ten people rose like a pew

full of singers in a church, and started for the gate. Oddly enough, when the Little Doctor pressed through, she glimpsed Dulcie Harlan a good ten feet ahead of her. Yet the Little Doctor would have sworn she was the first person out.

"Up this way," cried Harlan, mysteriously appearing at her elbow, though she had not seen him before that day. "It's quicker — I've a car that'll take you around in half the time you could walk it." He urged her up and out through the gate, the Old Man and Chip following. But Boy and the Happy Family streaked it straight across the arena, where the ambulance was already disappearing into the tunnel from which it had emerged.

How it happened no one knew, but Dulcie Harlan was riding inside, with Walt and the doctor. Walt talked fast. So the ambulance kept right on going until it backed up to the surgical entrance of St. Luke's hospital. At that, two cars followed close and arrived before the stretcher was wheeled into the corridor. Wherefore Harlan could speak for a private room and the attendance of the best surgeon in the place.

They wheeled him down other corridors

and around turns and finally out of sight into a room where only his father and mother were permitted to accompany him, the anxious-eyed little procession coming to a helpless stand. But in five minutes or less they wheeled him out again — now robed in immaculate white — and into another room where two surgeons waited to receive him. His small procession again waited outside the closed door, until a nurse took pity on them and led them into a near-by room where they could sit down. Many and many another group had sat there, waiting for news from the closed room beyond, hoping and fearing and sometimes praying. And at last Chip, paler than they had ever seen him, came out to them.

"Darned mutt," he said huskily, "he's been riding with a smashed knee for God knows how long. They're taking X-rays now to see whether he loses his leg or keeps it."

"Oh, then he *wasn't* — " Dulcie had no intention of finishing the sentence. "I knew all the while — "

"No, it's that leg. The doctors in there said it was a hospital case from the start. They can't see how he kept going."

"I know," said Walt, and cast a reproach-

ful look toward the Native Son. "Just nerve, that's how. He was bound nobody should call him a quitter."

"Good Lord!" muttered the Native Son, and turned to stare out of the window.

The Old Man suddenly struck his cane sharply on the floor.

"Dog-gone it, he's got more nerve than the hull bunch of yuh put together," he cried. "There's ain't a one of yuh that'd stand up under what he done. There ain't goin' to be any more of this naggin' at him, either; not while I'm around, there ain't!" He glared up at Chip. "You oughta be proud of 'im, dog-gone it! Ride here all the way from home, and —"

"Oh, forget it!" snapped Chip. "No need to rub it in, J. G. All I'm thinking of now is that leg."

They had time enough to think of the leg; plenty of time. Chip went back and stayed and stayed, while the Happy Family fidgeted in the waiting room. It seemed hours before they wheeled the Kid out again and down the corridor. They had just a glimpse of him as they passed the door; face white and still, eyes closed — just as he had looked when they

took him from the ambulance. They trailed after, sheepishly, knowing they were neither wanted nor needed, the Old Man hobbling his fastest to keep up, mumbling pettishly to himself.

They were standing grouped at a corner, not knowing which way the Kid, the Little Doctor and Chip, the white-coated attendants had gone, when one of the surgeons came along and took pity on them by sending them home.

"You can't do anything at all," he said smoothly. "He won't regain consciousness for hours, probably. His leg is in a bad way — but he has lived a clean, healthful life — no bad habits apparently — may carry a stiff knee the rest of his life, but we're going to save that leg if possible."

"'If possible!'" snorted Pink, as they went disconsolately down the steps, helping the Old Man who had suddenly lost his briskness. "Hell! I thought they had *doctors* in this town!"

They were back the next morning, but there were others before him. Dulcie Harlan, for one, wearing a diamond-shaped fraternity pin conspicuously on her white wool sweater, and

sitting very demurely on a straight-backed chair close beside the Kid's two pillows, against which his face looked wornly radiant, if you know what I mean. Gleaming whitely on the sheet pulled with hospital smoothness over his chest, stood a tall silver urn (though it was called a cup) with two graceful handles which the Kid's fingers caressed pridefully.

"Hello," he greeted the four members of the Happy Family cheerfully. "You know Dulcie, I guess — lookit what I got! Relay cup! Walt rode for me last night — Billy and Beck, here, helped. That's the advantage of having a team. Great boys, Walt and Beck and Billy. You met them — you must have. What do you think of my ponies? Pretty nearly as good as the horses back in them good old days, what?"

"Pretty near — not quite," grinned Andy.

"How's the leg?" Mig asked anxiously.

"He's going to stay put for awhile at least," the Little Doctor told them smilingly. "For a month or two I'll know where he is and what he's up to — and that won't be much, I promise you!"

"I might be up to quite a lot; you don't

know," the Kid retorted, glancing sidelong at Dulcie Harlan.

"It'll get all right, will it?" Weary persisted.

"Oh, yes," she assured them. "It will take time. He'll be on crutches — maybe for three or four months." Curiously, the Little Doctor said that almost as if she relished the idea! "But we'll save the joint from going stiff, I'm sure. Modern surgery can do wonders. He'll miss school, though, I'm afraid."

"Yes, you're afraid — like fun!" the Kid twitted her. "You and Dad will be darn glad to get rid of me when I do get out of the repair shop!"

"Not when it gives us an excuse to winter in Chicago once more," she told him. "We haven't, for ages."

"I know where there's the darlingest apartments in an apartment hotel, right up near us," Miss Dulcie Harlan hinted demurely.

The Kid grinned at his new silver cup.

"I'll leave Dell and J. G. here with the Kid, I think, soon as he gets out of the hospital," Chip said. "I'll have to keep an eye on the ranch. But there's no reason why they shouldn't stay as long as they like."

The Kid kept on grinning and turning the cup so that Dulcie's face was fantastically reflected in its polished side. He was still grinning when the nurse came and shooed them out.

THE END

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